

THE DECISIVENESS OF THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY

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Military History

by

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ABSTRACT

THE DECISIVENESS OF THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY, by LCDR Andres J. Aviles, 87 pages.

Since the end of the Pacific War, scholars have commonly viewed the Battle of Midway as both a decisive battle, as well as the turning point, of that war. The historiography of Midway has evolved over time, yet the vast majority of research has sought to improve the common understanding of the tactical details of the battle itself. Few authors have questioned the assertion that Midway was either decisive, or at the least the turning point of the war. Scholarship based on newly discovered information has sought to overturn commonly held myths surrounding the battle. This thesis attempts to examine the broader implications of the battle within the context of the Pacific War by analyzing the affects that the battle had at the strategic and operational level decision making for both the Allies (and in particular the United States) and the Japanese. Analyzing these changes will either point towards the decisiveness of the battle, towards its validity as the turning point of the war, or finally as an important milestone in the long progression of the conflict.

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ACRONYMS

IGHQ	Imperial General Headquarters
IJA	Imperial Japanese Army
IJN	Imperial Japanese Navy

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Scholars, historians and naval officers consider the Battle of Midway (4-7 June 1942) to be arguably the most important naval battle during World War II. The failure had great tactical significance in losses by the Japanese: four Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) aircraft carriers sunk, 253 carrier aircraft destroyed, and the most experienced aircraft pilots in the IJN killed. While the IJN never truly overcame these tactical losses, the importance of Japan's defeat at Midway was greater on the strategic level of conflict.

Many scholars and historians in the field of maritime strategy and policy (for example, Professor George Baer, a noted historian in field) make the argument that after the Battle of Midway (hereafter referred to simply as Midway) the Japanese lost momentum and were forced into a strategically defensive posture. Conversely, with its victory at Midway, the United States gained the strategic initiative in the Pacific War and the balance of sea power in the Pacific shifted in its favor.¹ This estimation of the value of Midway is widely held, and is in line with the common perception in the literature on maritime strategy in the Pacific War since the end of World War II. Newer scholarship—in particular Jonathan Parshall's and Anthony Tully's *Shattered Sword: the Untold Story of the Battle of Midway* (2005)²—however, challenges many of the common conceptions of Midway, seeking to not only reveal newly released information on the battle itself, but also overturn interpretations of the events surrounding Midway that have persisted for generations. This literature includes newly found and translated sources, as well as revisionist arguments based on existing sources.

In light of this new literature, this thesis intends to revisit the question of Midway's strategic importance in the Pacific War. Is Baer's interpretation of the significance of Midway correct? Further, how can one define or measure the strategic defensive? Had the Japanese already lost the offensive prior to the battle? Did they maintain it for some time afterwards? Was there another battle (or campaign) that more appropriately fits this shift of the offensive decisiveness? In essence, what did Midway truly decide?

This thesis posits that the common interpretation that Midway has the decisive turning point of the Pacific War is an over-simplification of a more complex historic series of strategic events during the course of the Pacific War. Specifically, the IJN did not lose the strategic offensive after Midway, but it did hinder their progress in subsequent operations in the Central and South Pacific. More importantly, this thesis will analyze at the strategic level (which is the focus of this thesis) any shift in focus by the IJN towards other objectives, such as solidifying its hold over the South Pacific by continued offensive operations in the region of the Solomon Islands, bolstering its defensive perimeter, as well as planning further operations against Australia. These objectives reflected the IJN General Staff's maritime strategy since Pearl Harbor, which will be described in this thesis. Perhaps most importantly for the Japanese, such a commitment would have all but eliminated other strategic possibilities that the Japanese had considered, including the possibility for a short conflict in which the Japanese government could negotiate a peace that would end the Pacific War. Any possibility for an invasion of American territories (for example, Hawaii, which was generally discredited anyway), or continued operations in the Indian Ocean would be foreclosed by

Southwest and South Pacific operations (New Guinea and the Solomon Islands) already approved by the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War.³

For the Americans, the victory at Midway saved the United States from further attacks on its possessions and territories, allowing the U.S. Navy to conduct counter-offensive operations in the Central and South Pacific. Eventually, the Americans, with newly commissioned ships and personnel, did clearly switch over to the strategic offensive in the war, but it is possible that Midway was not nearly as decisive in this regard as the conventional wisdom purports. Indeed, while significant offensive operations began within months of Midway's conclusion, significant U.S. advances from these operations in the Pacific did not begin until the middle of 1943, a year after Midway's completion.

This thesis includes a literature review of the topic to show the continued disparity between scholarly viewpoints of the strategic importance of Midway, and will examine the underlying arguments and assumptions for the decisiveness of Midway in chapter 2. Chapter 3 includes a brief overview of decisive victory theory, and then examines the major arguments that modify or discount the strategic importance of Midway by examining the effect of the victory on U.S. strategic and operational planning after the battle. It will investigate how Allied strategy was affected by the victory at Midway. Following this, the thesis will examine the effect of Midway's results on Japan's strategic and operational planning after the battle. Examining both the Japanese and American strategies as discussed in the important literature that exists on the battle, the thesis will re-assess the battle's strategic significance and suggest the scope and scale of the decision achieved at Midway at the various levels of war. Chapter 4 examines

other possible turning points in the Pacific War in which the strategic balance shifted in favor of the United States (for example, when the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff authorized the strategic offensive), some of which may rival the strategic impact that most attribute to Midway. These other battles and campaigns will be compared using criteria from several scholarly definitions of decisiveness, as well as Paul Davis' *100 Decisive Battles from Ancient Times to the Present* in order to not only evaluate Midway's suitability as a decisive victory, but also highlight the potential weaknesses in the popular narrative.⁴ Finally, this thesis will analyze the possibility that perhaps there was no one truly decisive victory for the Allies in the Pacific War. It will also suggest further areas for research raised by this investigation.

Primary Research Question

Was the Battle of Midway the decisive turning point of World War II in the Pacific War?

Secondary Research Questions

1. Did Midway cause the Allied military leadership—specifically decisions from the Combined Chiefs of Staff, US Joint Chiefs of Staff, including Fleet Admiral Ernest King, to the Pacific Fleet Headquarters, commanded by Admiral Chester Nimitz—to change their strategic plans and their execution in the Pacific?
2. Did Midway cause the Japanese leadership to change its strategy (including a resolution of the debate between the IJN General Headquarters and Admiral

Isoroku Yamamoto in the Combined Fleet, as well as the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War)?

3. What definitions are most suitable for: the strategic offensive, strategic initiative, and defensive in the context of Midway, and the Pacific War?
4. How did the results of Midway play out at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war?
5. Were there other battles or campaigns in the Pacific War that better fit the description of being the decisive turning point in the Pacific? Alternatively, was the Pacific War won by a culmination of milestones rather than a decisive victory?

Significance

Military historians and naval service members consider Midway to be one of the most important naval battles of all time, and arguably the most important in the Pacific War. Scholars and instructors alike look to Midway as an example of successful modern naval strategy, operational planning and leadership (both positive and negative), the importance of the aircraft carrier in modern warfare, and the significance of a decisive victory, or loss in the case of Japan. The research proposed here is based on the hypothesis that many of the ideas taken for granted relative to Midway are not entirely true and a battle of this magnitude that receives this much attention deserves the most accurate possible treatment. To challenge the basic assumptions made about the strategic effects of this battle might not only provide a more accurate view of history, but also a more accurate case study for comparative analysis of other maritime strategic issues.

Assumptions

Decisive victories have occurred in the past, and they can be well categorized and quantified. The Pacific War, and specifically Midway, has been well researched and so provides abundant evidence to assess decision across the levels of war.

Limitations and Delimitations

Any primary source material that requires travel outside of Kansas, Missouri, or nearby areas will not be available for this study. Sources in original Japanese will not be utilized.

This study will be limited to English-written or translated sources. The research presented in this thesis will be focused primarily on naval strategic decisions, with inputs from the Army leadership, political leaders (both for the United States and Japan), and U.S. allies consulted within the context of developing naval strategy.

¹ George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: the U.S. Navy, 1890-1990* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 220-221.

² Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully, *Shattered Sword: the Untold Story of the Battle of Midway* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005).

³ Edward K. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

⁴ Paul K. Davis, *100 Decisive Battles from Ancient Times to the Present* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2000).

CHAPTER 2

ANALYSIS OF MIDWAY LITERATURE

Accounts of Midway and its strategic implications flooded the literature of the immediate post-World War II era of scholarship. Since that time, most of the scholarly research conducted to improve our understanding of Midway has clarified the details of the battle itself. The implications on the strategic and operational level are still very much in dispute among scholars and military experts. Many arguments leave much to be desired, and contain the same sweeping statements of decisiveness that originated during and after the war.

Was Midway decisive? And if so, in what way(s)? This chapter will review the literature on Midway in an attempt to begin to answer this question. It will focus on the strategic and operational implications of the battle to illustrate the importance of the American victory. It will also provide a survey of different periods in Midway scholarship, and suggest reasons for the changing perspectives and interpretations over time. This chapter will also examine the secondary literature regarding the Japanese and Allied strategies before and after the battle. This analysis will set the stage for subsequent chapters that will delve more deeply into primary source material in order to analyze the implications of Midway on strategic and operational decision-making from the *in situ* decisions of Allied and Japanese leadership.

Evolution of Literature on Midway and Decisiveness

Samuel Morison wrote the earliest foundational scholarly work on Midway, utilizing not only substantial access to reports from the U.S. and Japanese naval forces,

but also his experience as a commissioned naval reserve officer on-board over eleven ships in the Atlantic and Pacific naval theaters. Morison authored an entire series of World War II naval publications, including the fourth volume that focused on, among other things, Midway.¹ Morison's stated goal was to write a work on the subject that corrected errors in early works produced during the war that were due to a lack of available information to early authors, particularly with respect to Japanese naval forces.² For the United States, in addition to his own research conducted during the war, Morison had access to King's operational reports to the Secretary of the Navy.³

In his work, Morison makes several key claims that this thesis will analyze closely: that the Japanese strategy after the initial six months of conflict included the Midway operation as a key part of their overall strategic design; that occupying Midway would set the stage for future attacks and possibly an invasion of Hawaii; and that Yamamoto sought to draw out the U.S. Pacific Fleet into a decisive engagement.⁴ On the American side, Morison discusses the operational planning of Midway by the Pacific Fleet Staff in detail, as well as key tactical decisions made by the task force commanders at the battle, but spends almost no time analyzing the strategic decision-making leading to the U.S. engagement at Midway. Rather, he takes his cue directly from King, who stated that Midway was "the first decisive defeat suffered by the Japanese Navy in 350 years."⁵ Finally, Morison concludes that after the battle, the Japanese had clearly shifted to the defensive, while the Allies had seized the offensive in the Pacific.⁶

Morison's foundational work set the tone for Midway scholarship for decades to come, and much of the literature about the Pacific War derived from a reading of his World War II series. After Morison's series, a veritable plethora of literature was

produced regarding Midway, and it is important to distinguish the types of literature and the associated values and motivations of each. Some literature surveys important battles for modern readers, covering a range of topics from the Battle of Thermopylae to the most recent engagements in the second Iraq War. These sources almost universally focus on the tactical engagements themselves, and give only a shallow treatment of any battle's implications and long-term effects. Recent examples of these great battles. books include Michael Lanning's *The Battle 100: The Stories Behind History's Most Influential Battles* (2003), Geoffrey Regan's *The Guinness Book of Decisive Battles* (1992), and Davis' *100 Decisive Battles from Ancient Times to the Present* (2000).⁷ Each of these books portray the commonly held notions of Midway as the decisive turning point of the Pacific War. Additionally, they seek not only to survey decisive battles as such, but also to use a battle such as Midway to explain the nature of war and how singular battles can drive a war's outcome.

Lanning states, "battles, and their outcomes, have been the single greatest factor in choices available to any given people," and quotes famous authors from Frederick the Great: "war is decided by battles alone and it is not decided except by them," to Carl von Clausewitz: "The battle is the most important and decisive factor."⁸ While both of these masters of war are recognized experts of their respective periods, many argue that so much has changed since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (for example, technology, industrialization, mass mobilization, and logistics) that these older judgments as expressed by Frederick and Clausewitz cannot necessarily be taken as fundamental aspects of war in the present.⁹ Colin Gray defines decisive victory as "sufficiency of military success to enable achievement of whatever it is that policy identifies as the war's

political object.”¹⁰ At the same time, Gray notes, “great resilience and depth of mobilization of assets in modern societies” may make individual battles less decisive than once thought. Can scholars still regard individual battles as decisive since the end of the Napoleonic Wars? This is an important question on causality that this thesis will analyze in chapter 5.

Yet the question remains: what did Midway decide? According to Lanning, it marked the last time that the Japanese mounted a significant offensive in the Pacific War, thus turning the tide of the war in favor of the Allies.¹¹ Lanning also states that prior to Midway, the Allies had the minimal assets required to fight the Japanese, whereas after Midway, the Allies needed no other assets.¹² That said, he neglects to conduct a comparative analysis of the forces available to the Japanese and the Allies in the Pacific after Midway. Additionally, Lanning does not define what constitutes significant offensives in this war, or the reasoning behind his conclusion about Japan’s lack of further such operations.

Regan’s analysis of battles such as Midway begins with the statement that their importance is “guided not by what effect they have on the present but how they decided the outcome of struggles between forces within a historical period.”¹³ This is certainly congruent with Gray’s definition above, but does it fit Regan’s description of Midway? In his analysis of Midway, Regan states that Midway “won America the breathing space she needed to turn her massive industries to the task of producing war materials . . . there were still Japanese victories to come, but after Midway defeat for Japan was only a matter of time.”¹⁴ If this is true, then Midway in and of itself was not decisive either in

Regan's definition, or in Gray's. It was merely an important part of a sequence of events that began with the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Perhaps the criteria for decisive victory are in question. Davis lists his own criteria in his survey of decisive battles as meeting any or all of the following: "the outcome of the battle brought about a major social or political change; had the outcome of the battle been reversed, major political or social changes would have ensued; or the battle marked the introduction of a major change in warfare."¹⁵ So where does Midway stand in his analysis? Davis claims that the Japanese continued the war after Midway almost completely on the defensive, and they were never again able to launch a major invasion effort.¹⁶ This does not square with subsequent offensive operations in the South Pacific that were either executed or planned by the Japanese following Midway, and so does not support his argument from the Japanese perspective.

According to Davis, "the loss of Midway could have spelled the loss of Pearl Harbor and the Hawaiian Islands . . . and could have precluded any US offensive into the Pacific."¹⁷ While many American military officers were legitimately concerned over the security of Hawaii after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese themselves had internally discounted any plans of a Hawaii invasion as early as 1942. Scholars as recent as Martin van Creveld in 2008 further this notion of history promoted by Morison by claiming that Japan's true objective at Midway was to capture the island to use as a stepping stone in the invasion of Hawaii.¹⁸ This completely misrepresents Yamamoto's intentions with respect to the Midway operation, and this commonly held view will be further discredited in this chapter.¹⁹

Generally, these surveys are less scholarly and aimed at popular reading audiences, and are easier to digest than more serious work. This does not necessarily negate the accuracy of their claims, but a more careful review of scholarly research on the subject can frequently dispel many of the myths surrounding Midway that these surveys propagate. Other surveys of maritime strategy are of a more scholarly and rigorous nature, such as Baer's *One Hundred Years of Sea Power* (introduced in chapter 1), Craig L. Symonds' *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles that Shaped American History* (2005),²⁰ and Naval War College Professor Milan Vego's *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice* (2007).²¹ These will be analyzed more fully from both the Japanese and American perspective in this chapter.

Examining scholarly work regarding Midway or the Pacific War in general, we find a wealth of information written since the end of World War II. Some literature sought to explain Midway immediately after the Pacific War, and included a combination of American and Japanese military officers attempting to explain their decision making several years after the battle's conclusion. Some of these writings (such as Nimitz's gray book and Admiral Matome Ugaki's memoirs) are primary source material that will be analyzed in subsequent chapters. Others include Commander Tad Tuleja's *Climax at Midway* (1960), written as a naval officer's analysis of the battle, concluding that Midway was "a decisive battle in the Pacific War, turning the tide of the war and shattering the Japanese dream of invincibility."²² This idea is consistent with American naval sentiment and early scholarly views of the war, particularly of Morison, from whose ideas Tuleja developed his research. Indeed, this view has persisted to this day, yet Tuleja offers little in the way of analysis of why the battle was decisive, beyond stating

that the assertion is obvious. This is the fundamental problem with the American scholarly viewpoint since the end of the war; scholars have characterized Midway as decisive without providing logical argument, but rather by assuming this as a fact.

The Japanese literature, most importantly the literature from former IJN officers, tries to reconcile their defeat with their previous string of successes. Describing victory disease as a reason for the seemingly inexplicable operational and tactical blunders at Midway itself, former officers Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumina present a detailed analysis of the Japanese naval frame of mind in their seminal work on Midway in 1955. They catalog their early training in the twenties, starting with pre-war preparations and training. They continue with the historic attack on Pearl Harbor, to analyses of post-phase I strategy, and finally to the actions and implications of Midway itself.²³ While these officers, especially the famous Fuchida who led the air raid on Pearl Harbor, were not involved in strategic level planning, they were intimately involved in tactical and to some degree operational planning, and their insights into this decision making process will be further examined in this chapter.²⁴

Fuchida and Okumina's conclusion on Midway's decisiveness is consistent with all early literature on the subject; Midway "without question" turned the tide of the Pacific War.²⁵ Further, it "bore the Japanese inexorably on toward final capitulation."²⁶ This begs the question: did the Japanese know this in the aftermath of the battle? Was it that clear that hope was lost and for the Japanese it was all downhill thereafter? The most appropriate way to ascertain the answer to this quandary is to examine the results of the battle on Allied and Japanese strategic and operational decision making, which is the focus of the next section of this chapter.

While the literature of this post-war period was entirely consistent in its approach to the implications of Midway, indeed taking for granted those implications, newer literature of the seventies and eighties took analysis of Midway into new realms. Scholars undertook several initiatives to provide a more historically accurate picture of the battle itself, especially after a string of Hollywood film productions in the early seventies. Beginning with Walter Lord's famous work *Incredible Victory: The Battle of Midway* (1967), renewed focus emerged on the exploits of individuals in the battle itself, focusing not on strategic or operational implications (this would come in later literature), but rather on the human element.²⁷ In Lord's book, and in subsequent films of the period, Midway was presented as a great drama, and indeed clarified some tactical and personnel details of the period, including a more comprehensive examination of the battle compared to the more broadly described situations in Morison's work.

Lord's powerful narrative led to a resurgence of interest, further sparked by films such as *Midway* (1976) and *Tora, Tora, Tora* (1970). In the latter film, adherence to historical accuracy of the attack on Pearl Harbor (at least, as well as was known at the time) was paramount, yet Pearl Harbor was much more studied than Midway, not only by scholars, but also by every level of the U.S. government. New insights led to a dissatisfaction of some scholars to the several varied questions that remained on the details of many Pacific War battles beyond Pearl Harbor, which led to new works, including Gordon Prange's seminal *Miracle at Midway* (1982), which initially focused on clarifying details leading up to the battle, as well as the tactical engagement itself.²⁸ Embarking on a ten-year journey beginning in the seventies, Prange and his co-writers delved into the history surrounding the battle itself, as well as events leading up to

Midway. Utilizing a wealth of primary source material, Prange painted the most detailed picture of Midway to that point in time, including challenges to the commonly held notion up to that point that Midway was to serve as a precursor to a Hawaii invasion.²⁹ Fuchida himself had dismissed this notion years earlier in his work on Japanese decision-making and planning, yet this component of the dominant narrative persisted for years in American literature, discussed in the next section.³⁰ Prange delivered detailed accounts of key Allied and Japanese decision makers, and these Japanese sources clearly point to Yamamoto's desire for a decisive fleet engagement to complete the destruction of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.³¹

While *Miracle at Midway* is an outstanding work for its analysis of pre-Midway decisions and the tactical details of the battle itself, it included little substantial analysis of the implications of the battle to the rest of the Pacific War at large. To provide a more complete picture of these missing elements, historian Hadley Willmott began a comprehensive series of works on the Pacific War in the 1980s. Willmott began, in *Empires in the Balance: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies to April 1942* (1982), to discuss Allied and Japanese strategy leading up to World War II, and continued with *The Barrier and the Javelin: Japanese and Allied Strategies, February to June 1942* (1983), which provided the earliest, most consistently logical and complete picture of Japanese decision-making before and after Midway in the literature to that point in time.³²

Willmott responded to earlier literature on this subject that had so fascinated him during his professorship at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, by addressing the apparent weaknesses in the existing literature of the time, both logical and historical, including much of the newer literature of the seventies. From the outset, he noted logical

inconsistencies with accounts of the Pacific War, and especially took issue with the “narrow and nationalistic view of Midway being decisive and inevitable—a paradoxical view.”³³ Willmott continued his analysis of the Pacific War in several volumes, and in particular, with *The War with Japan: The Period of Balance, May 1942-October 1943* (2002), he covered strategic and operational decision making in the aftermath of the battles of Coral Sea and Midway.³⁴ The strength of Willmott’s arguments are immediately recognizable, yet so many of the inconsistencies and fallacies that he sought to redress have persisted to this day, perhaps due to what he called the “narrow and nationalistic” view of history by the Allies since the war’s end.³⁵

Since Willmott’s series on the Pacific War was published, few authors have presented new strategic arguments as challenging or compelling as those presented in *The Barrier and the Javelin*, and instead were content to expound on the operational and tactical lessons learned that military professionals could glean from this famous battle. Indeed, popular military history authors, while furthering research on the battle itself or on the Pacific War in general, continued the familiar refrain that Midway was clearly the decisive battle of the Pacific War.³⁶ However, the latest literature from the last decade finally gave rise to new questions and challenges to Midway’s scholarly authenticity. Lost evidence discovered in sunken remains of Japanese ships from the Pacific War provided new insights into the operational and tactical decisions and actions by the Japanese.³⁷ Additionally the Japanese government completed its massive official history of the Pacific War—the *senshi sosho* or war history series—much of which has subsequently been translated into English, but only recently have scholars taken full advantage of it vis-à-vis the engagement at Midway in June 1942.³⁸

Armed with this new knowledge, several authors have re-envisioned the tactical engagement. Parshall's and Tully's *Shattered Sword* (2005) offered new insights into the tactical and operational details of the engagement, as many authors before them had done, and sought to correct the many "myths" surrounding the battle.³⁹ Additionally, their conclusions did not revert to the oft-touted obvious implications of Midway as the decisive turning point of the Pacific War. Rather, they took up Willmott's argument that these often-assumed implications are inaccurate, and advocated further research and discussion to more objectively validate what the strategic and operational implications of Midway were.⁴⁰

While the discussion so far has shown a historic and thematic arc of scholarly progress thus far since the end of the war, it is easy to see that many controversies and discrepancies still exist over the interpretation of Midway's implications. Even after all the years spent clarifying the tactical picture of the engagement, scholars still hold to common (and potentially outdated) views of Midway's importance, however illogical. The remainder of this chapter will examine more closely the literature examining the strategic and operational decisions for both the Allied and Japanese leadership.

Evaluating the Literature on Japanese Strategy

This section of the chapter will evaluate the view of historians on Japanese strategy and decision-making for Midway and its implications. As an aside, this author's sense is that the Japanese perspective has been most misunderstood and this chapter will, accordingly, give a more detailed discussion of this topic in the literature. Traditional literature regarding Midway offers several explanations as to why scholars view the battle as the key turning point in the Pacific War. First, many scholars have argued that

following their defeat at Midway, the Japanese changed their maritime strategy; in particular, Japan shifted to the strategic defensive.

Morison, who sought to illuminate for early post-war scholars the Japanese perspective that he had found lacking wrote definitively that capturing Midway was an essential component of Japanese military strategy.⁴¹ Midway was required to establish an extended defensive perimeter from which the Japanese could maintain U.S. forces well clear of the Japanese homeland (especially prescient after the Doolittle Raid), as well as the crucial sea lines of communications from the South Pacific. Morison also noted that Yamamoto desired to use Midway as the means from which to draw out the U.S. Pacific Fleet into a decisive fleet engagement.⁴² Morison described this strategy as the natural outgrowth of the Japanese completing the first six months of their offensives in the Pacific War, beginning with the attack on Pearl Harbor, a point which many historians challenged in later scholarship.

Morison concluded his analysis of Midway's implications by stating that the failure at Midway forced the Japanese to shift to the defensive and cancel their planned invasions of Fiji, New Caledonia, and New Zealand.⁴³ As Morison was the first prominent historian to conduct a proper analysis of the Japanese strategies and decisions in the Pacific War, subsequent scholarly analysis generally held to these views. Shortly after the completion of Morison's volume on Midway, the U.S. Military Academy published a series examining the Pacific War, which included many details from wartime documents found during the occupation of Japan.⁴⁴ Their analyses of new documents further validated Morison's assertions.

One of the first challenges to Morison's ideas came from Fuchida's and Okumina's famous work on the Japanese Navy in the Pacific War. Fuchida and Okumina directly challenged the assertion that the Japanese military's goal was to use Midway as a staging point for a Hawaii invasion, stating that such a strategy never entered their decision-making calculations, especially with the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) reticence towards committing additional land forces away from China.⁴⁵ Fuchida and Okumina also challenged the idea that Midway was a natural outgrowth of Japanese first-phase strategy; a continued seize and hold in the South Pacific for the next phase of the Pacific War. The IJN staff primarily focused on the procurement of oil, and saw neither Midway nor Hawaii as necessary adjuncts to this.⁴⁶ Indeed, by April of 1942, the Combined Fleet Staff, after extensive analysis, agreed that a Hawaii invasion by the Japanese was infeasible.⁴⁷ Furthermore, they argued that at this point, due to the spectacular successes that Japan had achieved beyond its expectations over such a short period, the Japanese leadership had great difficulty and debate in deciding how best to continue operations.⁴⁸ Some in the Navy General Staff argued that the IJN could attrite the U.S. Pacific Fleet during the Allies' inevitable attacks on the Japanese Pacific perimeter. They argued that the IJN should consolidate its gains in the South Pacific, with additional offensive operations near Australia and even into the Indian Ocean.⁴⁹

On the other hand, Fuchida notes, Yamamoto and his Combined Fleet Staff felt that only by attacking U.S. territory (namely Midway) could the United States be drawn out into a decisive naval battle, and this should occur soon since the U.S. Pacific Fleet was still relatively weak.⁵⁰ Before continuing, it is important to briefly describe the so-called Mahanian theory of decisive naval combat. Professor and naval officer Alfred

Mahan wrote the seminal *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History (1660-1783)* in a time of great change in not only society's progress and the Industrial Revolution but also geopolitical shifts.⁵¹ His writings gained significant attention by world leaders, not the least of which was the maritime nation of Japan, who sought great power status and recognition by the Western powers. While Mahan describes his ideas in broad strokes and historical descriptions, John Adams presents a good distillation of his ideas in his work, *If Mahan Ran the Great Pacific War*.⁵² First, a great power requires a great navy to support its overseas colonies and economy. Additionally, and what many naval theorists thought of prime importance, the objective of a country's fleet is to destroy the enemy fleet.⁵³ Once this is accomplished, control of the seas would be assured. These theories, so crucial to naval development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, deeply shaped Yamamoto's concept in the fight against the U.S. Pacific Fleet, whom he had failed to destroy in the Pearl Harbor attack. Still, the IJN General Staff was not sold on Yamamoto's plan to seek the decisive, Mahanian engagement by attacking Midway.

After the IJN's embarrassment over the Doolittle Raid, and with the IJA's concurrence (see next chapter on the decision making process for the IJN with the IJA), Yamamoto's plan gained strategic approval and the IJN pressed ahead for planning and execution of the Midway operation.⁵⁴ This chapter has already discussed Fuchida's and Okumina's analysis on Midway's strategic implications, but a final important note on the work comes from Parshall's "Reflecting on Fuchida" in *The Naval War College Review* (2010).⁵⁵ Parshall described the many half-truths about Japanese naval operations that Fuchida wrote in his many sources. Whether due to his post-war religious conversion or his popularity with Americans, or his possible desire to ingratiate himself to the

American public, Parshall and other scholars have called into question Fuchida's motivations and the accuracy of his work. Much of this criticism revolves around Fuchida's account of tactical details and decisions. Still, his insight into Japanese decision-making remains valuable, and we cannot overlook his challenges to Morison's descriptions.

Fuchida's and Okumina's description of Japanese decision-making remained the dominant narrative throughout the sixties and seventies, as scholarly research (such as Lord's *Incredible Victory*) did more to update the tactical details of the battle itself than the decision-making processes or implications. Works such as Russell Weigley's *The American Way of War: A History of the United States Military Strategy and Policy* (1973) discussed Japanese decision-making in the same vein as Fuchida and Okumina, and focused more on updating views of American strategic decisions (which this thesis will analyze later this chapter).⁵⁶ According to Weigley, Yamamoto sought battle at Midway and the Aleutian Islands as "Eastern bastions for the defense of Japan's conquered empire, and much more importantly Yamamoto hoped, compel the remaining ships of the U.S. Pacific Fleet to give battle."⁵⁷ This agrees with Fuchida's and Okumina's arguments.

Peter Smith's *The Battle of Midway* (1976), while focused primarily on the details of the battle, also discussed the decision-making process. His was an interesting combination of Fuchida's position (albeit a decade later) of Yamamoto's insistence on the decisive battle for its own sake, while at the same time continuing Morison's assertion that Hawaii was the ultimate prize for the Japanese after the successful occupation of Midway.⁵⁸ Smith's work is typical of writing in this period on Japanese

decisions, a combination of Morison, Fuchida, and Okumina. The respected research of Morison, coupled with the insider knowledge of Fuchida and Okumina, seemed to most historians to make sense and required little additional analysis to this point, absent some overriding stimulus.

Perhaps the most important update to our understanding of Japanese decision-making came in the form of Prange's *Miracle at Midway*. In this work, Prange presented a tremendous amount of new material, including primary sources from journals, reports and memoirs, as well as numerous interviews with former IJN officers and Japanese scholars. This allowed him to present a fuller picture of the period of decision-making leading up to Midway, as well as a detailed description of the battle from both the Japanese and American sides. Indeed, one of Prange's stated goals for the work was to offer a more complete picture of the IJN than other scholars had presented due to their lack of material. However, he also noted that his work sought to "complement, rather than supplant"⁵⁹ the existing foundational Midway works, and specifically referenced the work of Morison, Fuchida, and Okumina. Hence, *Miracle at Midway* was not an attempt to present a new argument, but rather was a way to enhance an understanding of Midway by presenting a more complete history. In particular, Prange's sources confirm many of the assertions made by Fuchida and Okumina (for example, the divide between the Navy General Staff and Combined Fleet staffs, discarding the Hawaii invasion plans, and confusion over a follow-on strategy after the first six months of the war had finished).⁶⁰

Prange's work succeeds as an outstanding complement to and enhancement of existing knowledge and perspectives of Japanese strategy and decision-making during the Pacific War, yet spends almost no time discussing the aftermath of the battle and its

implications. He gives a brief, succinct series of statements regarding the decisiveness of the battle, yet does not include substantial analysis of these implications.⁶¹ That said, there are two comments of interest here that are worth including. First, Yamamoto considered the defeat at Midway as merely a setback, and still sought the decisive fleet engagement after the battle.⁶² Second, while the U.S. media of the time praised the victory at Midway, there were some writers who cautioned against over-estimating Midway's implications. In particular, *The Washington Post* noted just days after Midway's completion that Midway "was a good victory, but is not the clincher."⁶³ Unfortunately, the majority of the literature on Midway has overlooked these sentiments in its pronouncements of Midway's decisiveness.

Willmott's works on the Pacific War (outlined in the preceding section) were the first substantive works to not only question Midway's decisiveness, but also provide a detailed discussion of Japanese and American decision-making before, during, and after Midway. Willmott did not bring to light new sources and evidence (as in the case of Prange, Fuchida, and Okumina) for his arguments, but rather focused on reinterpreting the given knowledge on Japanese decision-making to draw new conclusions. He employed a systematic, logical review of the same information other scholars had available, yet took for granted. Willmott was perhaps the first author to question the decades long beliefs that Midway was clearly a decisive victory, and the turning point of the Pacific War. Instead, he emphasized in *The Barrier and the Javelin* the combination of Midway, Coral Sea, and Guadalcanal as collectively leading to the true shift in Japanese strategy from the offensive to defensive.⁶⁴

Willmott continued with this approach in *The War with Japan*, which presented a detailed discussion of the strategic choices of both Japan and the Allies following Midway. While the bulk of his discussion involved American planners, he does note the perception of Midway as a setback, and furthermore as a reason for the Navy General Staff to retake control of strategic and operational decision-making from Yamamoto. Hence, Midway gave credence (and perhaps necessity) to the IJN staff's original strategy of seize and hold in the South Pacific, which called for continued offensives into these areas to secure Japan's own sea lines of communication, while simultaneously disrupting those of the Allies.⁶⁵

Willmott presented invaluable arguments that challenged long-held notions on Midway, yet in spite of this, authors throughout the eighties and nineties continued with the narrative of the Japanese decision-making processes and history as presented by Fuchida and Okumina, and supplemented by Prange. Scholars saw these works as so monumental in their impact that, coupled with Morison, they presented all of the required scholarly insight that writers felt that they needed. Furthermore, their conclusions are explicitly used in the vast majority of literature in this period, from reviews on the Pacific War—such as Clayton James' essay in the 1986 edition of *Makers of Modern Strategy* used in all the American war colleges—to works on the battles themselves. These last include Jack Greene's *The Midway Campaign: December 7, 1941-June 6, 1942* and Eric Hammel's *Guadalcanal: Decision at Sea. The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, November 13-15, 1942* (1988).⁶⁶ It is interesting to note that while Hammel's analysis of Guadalcanal echoes Willmott's sentiment regarding the importance of the battle in

changing the course of the war for Japanese decision-makers, he still adheres to Midway as the decisive turning point of the Pacific War.⁶⁷

While research has continued unceasingly in clarifying tactical and operational details of Midway (excellent examples of which are Parshall's and Tully's *Shattered Sword*, and Dallas Isom's 2007 book *Midway Inquest: Why the Japanese Lost the Battle of Midway*); Fuchida's, Morison's, and Prange's narratives remain the dominant position of Japanese decision-making during the Pacific War.⁶⁸ In spite of new works that provide additional information on the decision-makers themselves (such as Edwin Hoyt's *Yamamoto: The Man who Planned the Attack on Pearl Harbor*, 2001), little has been challenged concerning these authors' formulations of Japanese decision-making.⁶⁹ Scholars have yet to overturn Willmott's arguments by any detailed study of the IJN. Hence, it is necessary to delve into the records more closely to resolve this dissonance, which the next chapter will seek to accomplish.

Literature Evaluating the American Strategy

This chapter has thus far focused on the arguments concerning the Japanese strategy before, during, and after Midway. What of the Americans? The principle argument for Midway's effect on American Pacific strategy was that with the victory at Midway, "the United States would never have to fight another defensive campaign," and "the balance of sea power in the Pacific shifted in favor of the United States."⁷⁰ Where do the roots of this argument lie? The USN published King's operational reports to the Secretary of the Navy during World War II (which this thesis will examine in more detail in the next chapter), and in these reports King characterizes Midway as the point at which the United States shifted from the defensive-offensive to the offensive-defensive; that is,

initially the United States fought from a primarily defensive position with limited offensive operations, but after Midway the United States, while not engaged in the full Pacific offensive that was to come, was able to conduct counter-offensives at Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands.⁷¹

Fortunately for the study of Allied strategy, sources were available even during the war, and especially immediately afterwards, making scholarly research much more straight-forward than Japanese decision-making. In fact, the essential narrative of strategic and operational planning provided by Morison and King provided the foundation for all additional analysis, which did not change the narrative of Allied strategy to any great degree, but rather enhanced and expounded on what King and Morison had already provided. This is the essential difference with scholarship on Japanese decision-making, which understandably lacked clarity in early scholarship until more sources became available or were declassified (including U.S. signals intelligence collected from Japanese communications).

The preponderance of scholarly output for the Americans at Midway has focused on clarifying tactical details. Thus, this section will focus on the key literary milestones in the evolution of the research on American strategy and decision-making. Kent Greenfield's famous work *American Strategy in World War II: A Reconsideration* (1963) lays out new considerations for the analysis of strategy as more than just military strategy, but also national strategy.⁷² While Greenfield did not discuss Midway in detail, he did provide an expanded framework for strategic analysis on the Pacific War for future scholars studying in this field. Among these was Weigley in *The American Way of War*, who utilized Greenfield's expanded definitions of strategy to analyze the Pacific War.

Weigley also noted that King felt that Japan had reached “the culminating point of victory (King’s own words): and that the United States must then seize the opportunity.”⁷³ Further, he believed Japan had “lost control of the momentum of the war.”⁷⁴ This belief was not held by many in the other services, but such was the strength of King’s personality and his power within the Joint Chiefs (as well as the Army and Air Force’s preoccupation with the European theater) that by combining his influence with the inherent political pressure from the American public to strike back at Japan he was able to initiate limited offensive operations in the Pacific.

Weigley specifically calls King’s views out as being an important part of the decision for further action in the Pacific. The victory at Midway enabled the Navy to conduct a limited series of offensive operations designed to throw the IJN off balance and prevent it (or at least forestall it) from continuing its drives into the Indian Ocean and against Australia. These limited offensives also provided the American forces a starting-point towards commencing its first major campaign in the Pacific; the Solomon Islands Campaign. Vego, writing to military officers in his seminal work *Joint Operational Warfare* (2007), noted, “The United States Navy achieved an operational success in the Battle of Midway . . . However, that in itself would not have been sufficient to reverse the tide in the Pacific had it not been followed by an offensive operation to exploit the operational success at Midway.”⁷⁵

The narrative of Midway’s place in American decision-making was beginning to change. After Greenfield and Weigley, scholars who looked beyond the battle itself and into the greater context of the war saw the importance of subsequent operations (for example, Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands). No author denied the importance of

Midway itself, but was Midway decisive, or was it part of a larger collection of battles or campaigns that led the Allies to victory in the Pacific? Willmott sought to answer these very questions, and while he did address the Japanese decisions in this period, he spent considerably more time on the Allies, and in particular the United States.

Willmott challenged the simple view of decisiveness, and saw instead a series of milestones over the course of a long war that shaped American strategic decisions at each stage. No one stage was necessarily more decisive than the other, yet taken as a whole, the Allies were able to eventually transition from a defensive fight to the offensive. While the next chapter will use Willmott's approach in more detail to expound upon the changes in American decision-making, perhaps the most important argument by Willmott was that scholars should not think of the evolution of decision-making in the war as occurring quickly in discrete, decisive points, but rather as a natural, realistic evolution of one power doing its best to anticipate and counter the moves of another, while at the same time attempting to seize what initiative it could.⁷⁶

In contrast to this view, Baer's work *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: the U.S. Navy, 1890-1900* paints a more traditional, discrete view (decisiveness as opposed to Willmott's milestones). Baer utilizes a combination of Weigley and Greenfield's strategic analysis coupled with Mahan's theories of sea power to study the U.S. Navy over a century. Baer uses a clear, concise theoretical framework coupled with historical events to illustrate the importance of sea power, and the Pacific War is one of the crucial periods of his book. His views and analysis, while important to the naval scholar and historian, represent a retrenchment from the idea that with the victory at Midway, the United States seized the strategic initiative and commenced offensive operations against the Japanese.⁷⁷

In essence, the decision was clear for the Allies; commence offensive operations. Yet, as Willmott argues, this was not as clear to those in the American armed forces at the time.

Even after the victory at Midway, the American leadership still debated over what should be done in the aftermath. It was not clear that American forces should seize the initiative and commence offensive (even limited) operations in the Pacific. The Navy, whose opinion prevailed, believed this to be the opportunity to strike back at the IJN by conducting limited offensive operations in the Pacific theater, still something contested by Army commanders. In essence, the United States did not claim the strategic offensive immediately after Midway, and still could not decide on what strategy to use in the theater. Similarly, the Japanese faced uncertainty and retrenchment. Rather than portraying the situation as a straight-forward shift from the defensive to the offensive, and of the Allies seizing the initiative, Willmott uses a fascinating analogy: “the most important, immediate, and obvious result [of Midway] was that the strategic initiative was like a gun lying in the street: it was there for either side to pick up and use.”⁷⁸

While scholars have expanded on these ideas, none have fundamentally altered or challenged the strategic decision-making analyses of these authors. The most interesting aspect of the literature regarding Allied strategy is that the immense volume of information, available since the end of the war, has served not only to illuminate important historical events, but also, due to differing evaluations, produce vastly different conclusions about the inherent importance of a single battle. Who is correct? Can Baer’s discrete explanations (to borrow terms from mathematics) win over Willmott’s continuum? This is the foremost problem that requires resolution, which this thesis will attempt to resolve in subsequent chapters.

Conclusion

The writings of Morison, as expanded and revised by Fuchida and Okumina, have dominated the literature on Midway. Outside of Willmott, who set the stage in the early eighties for new analyses into strategic decisions and implications, few authors have done more than clarify tactical and operational details, or offer treatises on the leadership qualities of the decision makers themselves. With so much already written on Midway, why should anyone conduct further analysis on the matter? It is obvious from the examination above that numerous fundamental discrepancies exist in the literature, which is disconcerting for such a well-known and well-studied battle. U.S. Navy sailors celebrate the American victory over the Japanese at Midway annually, and naval professionals view the battle as a fundamental part of naval history and heritage.

Hans Delbrück, a professional military historian in nineteenth century Germany, critically commented on the German General Staff in his day. Historian Gordon Craig noted in his famous essay on Delbrück, “If history was to serve the soldier, it was necessary that the military record be an accurate one, and that past military events be divested of the misconceptions and myths that had grown around them.”⁷⁹ This applies just as well to the modern military professional as it did to nineteenth century general staff officers and Midway is a prime example of a battle that deserves this kind of re-evaluation. Indeed, Morison himself recognized his own limitations, and hoped that future generations would continue to update his work when new information became available.⁸⁰

The next chapter will analyze the arguments for Midway’s decisiveness by delving into primary sources to examine the actual decision making processes for both

the U.S./Allies and Japanese in detail. This will enable an evaluation of how strategic and operational decisions may have changed based on Midway's results, which should help to answer the question of Midway's decisiveness.

¹ Samuel E. Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II: vol. 4, Coral Sea, Midway and Submarine Actions, May 1942-August 1942* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1949).

² Ibid., ix.

³ Ernest J. King, *U.S. Navy at War: 1941-1945* (Washington, DC: US Navy Department, 1946).

⁴ Morison, 74-76.

⁵ King, 49.

⁶ Morison, 159.

⁷ Michael L. Lanning, *The Battle 100: The Stories Behind History's Most Influential Battles* (Naperville, IL: Source Books, 2003); Geoffrey Regan, *The Guinness Book of Decisive Battles* (New York: Canopy Books, 1992); Davis.

⁸ Lanning, xi-xii; Carl von Clausewitz, *Principles of War*, trans. George Hamm (Charleston, SC: Createspace Publications, 2010), 35.

⁹ Colin S. Gray, *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2002), 11.

¹⁰ Ibid., 12-13.

¹¹ Lanning, 150.

¹² Ibid., 151.

¹³ Regan, 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., 197.

¹⁵ Davis, xi.

¹⁶ Ibid., 402.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Martin van Creveld, *The Changing Face of War: Lessons of Combat from the Marne to Iraq* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008).

¹⁹ Of note, John J. Stephan's book *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun* describes Japanese planning for the invasion of Hawaii in detail. However, while plans existed, they were abandoned quickly by the IJN, especially in light of the lack of IJA support. Hence, one should not misconstrue the existence of plans as the final indicator of Japan's intentions with Midway. John J. Stephan, *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun: Japan's Plans for Conquest After Pearl Harbor* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

²⁰ Craig L Symonds. *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles that Shaped American History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²¹ Milan N Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Newport, RI: US Naval War College Press, 2007).

²² Thaddeus V. Tuleja, *Climax at Midway* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1960), 17.

²³ Mitsuo Fuchida and Masatake Okumina, *Midway: The Battle That Doomed Japan, the Japanese Navy's Story* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1955). The writers, along with the authors in West Point's *The War with Japan*, describe the initial operational and strategic goals of the so-called "First Phase" of the Japanese offensive, beginning in Pearl Harbor, and ending in April 1942, after the Japanese had made substantial gains far faster than anticipated. This was one reason for the lack of proper "Phase Two" planning before Midway. Department of Military Art and Engineering, *The War with Japan* (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy Press, 1950).

²⁴ Fuchida and Okumina, 11-20.

²⁵ Ibid., xi.

²⁶ Ibid., 231.

²⁷ Walter Lord, *Incredible Victory: The Battle of Midway* (New York: Harper and Rowe Publishers, 1967).

²⁸ Gordon W. Prange, Donald M. Goldstein, and Katherine V. Dillon, *Miracle at Midway* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982).

²⁹ Ibid., 28.

³⁰ Fuchida and Okumina, 34, 50.

³¹ Prange, 29.

³² Hadley P. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies to April 1942* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1982); Hadley P. Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin: Japanese and Allied Strategies, February to June 1942* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983).

³³ Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, xi.

³⁴ Hadley P. Willmott, *The War with Japan: The Period of Balance, May 1942-October 1943* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002).

³⁵ Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, xi.

³⁶ Jack Greene, *The Midway Campaign: December 7, 1941-June 6, 1942* (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Books, 1995); Mark Healy, *Midway 1942: Turning-Point in the Pacific* (Hong Kong: Osprey Publishing, 1999); John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

³⁷ Parshall and Tully, xxiii.

³⁸ See, for example, Pacific Wrecks, “Senshi Sosho,” last updated 27 August 2014, accessed 14 November 2014, http://www.pacificwrecks.com/reviews/senshi_sosho.html, for a site that discusses senshi sosho; Parshall and Tully, xxiv.

³⁹ Parshall and Tully, xxii.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 421, 428.

⁴¹ Morison, 74.

⁴² Ibid., 75.

⁴³ Ibid., 159.

⁴⁴ Department of Military Art and Engineering.

⁴⁵ Fuchida and Okumina, 34.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 20-24.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 50-51.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 36-37.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 49.

⁵¹ Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History: 1660-1783* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1890).

⁵² John A. Adams, *If Mahan Ran the Great Pacific War: An Analysis of World War II Naval Strategy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 2-5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁴ Fuchida and Okumina., 71.

⁵⁵ Johnathan Parshall, "Reflecting on Fuchida, or A Tale of Three Whoppers," *The Naval War College Review* 63, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 127-138.

⁵⁶ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of the United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁵⁸ Peter C. Smith, *The Battle of Midway* (Staplehurst, UK: Spellmount, 1976), 29.

⁵⁹ Prange, vii.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 14-16, 20-21.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 367.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 360-361.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 366.

⁶⁴ Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 514.

⁶⁵ Willmott, *The War with Japan*, 96-99.

⁶⁶ D. Clayton James, "American and Japanese Strategies in the Pacific War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Greene; Eric Hammel, *Guadalcanal: Decision at Sea. The Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, November 13-15, 1942* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988).

⁶⁷ Hammel, 31.

⁶⁸ Dallas W. Isom, *Midway Inquest: Why the Japanese Lost the Battle of Midway* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007).

⁶⁹ Edwin P. Hoyt, *Yamamoto: the Man who Planned the Attack on Pearl Harbor* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2001).

⁷⁰ Baer, 221.

⁷¹ King, 39.

⁷² Kent R. Greenfield, *American Strategy in World War II: A Reconsideration* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 1963).

⁷³ Weigley, 274.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 273.

⁷⁵ Vego, X-84. Professor Vego is one of the foremost writers on differentiating strategic versus operational versus tactical levels of war, which this thesis will analyze further in the next chapter.

⁷⁶ Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 514; Willmott, *The War with Japan*, 89-90.

⁷⁷ Baer, 220-221.

⁷⁸ Willmott, *The War with Japan*, 90.

⁷⁹ Gordon A. Craig, "Delbruck: The Military Historian," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 326.

⁸⁰ Morison, *Coral Sea, Midway and Submarine Actions*, x.

CHAPTER 3

MIDWAY'S DECISIVENESS

The previous chapter clarified that there is a lack of consensus on the answer to the question, was Midway the decisive turning point of World War II in the Pacific? This chapter seeks to answer this question by analyzing the effects of the success (or loss) at Midway on the strategic and operational decision-making of the Japanese and Allies. This will allow a more clear judgment on Midway as a decisive battle, and as the turning point of the Pacific War. Before beginning, it is important to establish what is meant by a decisive victory, and by a war's turning point. Chapter 2 discussed several definitions of decisive victories that are worth revisiting briefly. It is important to note that a decisive battle should not be confused by military professionals with a decisive point, as defined by current military doctrine.¹

Davis states his criteria for decisiveness as meeting any or all of the following: “the outcome of the battle brought about a major social or political change; had the outcome of the battle been reversed, major political or social changes would have ensued; or the battle marked the introduction of a major change in warfare.”² No scholar argues that Midway had the tremendous political or social change that Davis describes. Indeed, by this definition, the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June 1944 was a better candidate for a decisive battle; Prime Minister Hideki Tojo resigned his post, and the IJN was in dire straits.³ Furthermore, one could argue that the major change in warfare from the battle, that of aircraft carriers, can already be seen in battle prior to Midway. Hence, this definition of decisiveness is too broad and insufficient for our analysis. Gray defines decisive victory as “sufficiency of military success to enable achievement of whatever it

is that policy identifies as the war's political object."⁴ Did Midway enable the achievement of the Pacific War's objective, which the Allies defined in 1942 as the complete surrender of the Japanese? Since the war continued for three years after Midway, the battle certainly did not decide the war's outcome immediately or directly (as compared to, say, the Battle of Austerlitz in the War of the Third Coalition in 1805).⁵ Gray also discusses battles that are decisive at the operational level; for example, battles that decide the campaign's outcome, but not necessarily the war.⁶ Can Midway meet these criteria? And if so, is this what is normally meant when scholars and popular writers call Midway decisive? Thomas Goss modifies Gray's definition as follows: "A decisive battle must directly lead to a rapid resolution of the contested political issues because the results on the battlefield caused *both sides* to agree that a decision had been reached."⁷ Goss's definition is important as it specifically calls out the necessity of agreement by both sides, which, as this chapter will show, was a central issue in the effect of Midway on Japanese and Allied decision-making. Hence, using Gray's and Goss' definitions, this chapter will examine Midway's decisiveness at both the strategic and operational levels for the Japanese and Allies.

What if Midway, as Parshall and Tully claim, was not decisive, but was the turning point in the Pacific War?⁸ What does turning point mean in this context? Roger Launius defines the turning point of a war as "an event or set of events that, had it not happened as it did, would have prompted a different course in history."⁹ Equivalently, a turning point in the Pacific War would be an event that changed the outcome of the war from its original trajectory. Baer's statement (examined in chapter 2) that Midway marked the point at which the United States shifted to the strategic offensive, and

conversely Japan shifted to the strategic defensive, can also be interpreted as describing the Pacific War's turning point. Without resorting to counterfactual arguments, one can examine the validity of the claim that Midway was the turning point of the Pacific War in the context of these preceding definitions. It is important to note that while the decisiveness of a battle, by its very nature, is evident from the moment of victory, a war's turning point may not be evident immediately, but rather in hindsight of months or years. Clausewitz himself discussed the relationship of a battle's victory to its effect on the overall strategic or operational outcome of a war in the battle's aftermath. In particular, he discussed how the momentum of a conflict can change based not only on a battle itself, but also events in the immediate aftermath of that battle which gain such a rapidity of movement that the outcome of the war becomes clear (which correlates to a turning point).¹⁰ In light of this, this chapter will examine both Midway's decisiveness and status as the turning point of the war in order to help settle the original questions of the thesis (both primary and secondary) by an examination of both primary source materials (for example, reports, directives, estimates, memoirs, etc.) with secondary source analysis to evaluate the view of the battle as a turning point.

Evaluating the Impact of Midway on Japanese Strategy

This section of the chapter will evaluate the arguments for Midway's decisiveness from the impact of the battle on Japanese strategic and operational decision making. Before evaluating these arguments, it is important to describe the institutions and processes involved in Japan's decision making, because the Japanese system was very different from that of the Allies in World War II (which will be discussed in the next section). While ostensibly a democratic system, the Japanese government had in effect

been taken over by militarists who ultimately controlled national decision making. Additionally, military factions held enormous power over policy without the benefit of proper civilian oversight and control like that found in the Allied governments of the U.S. and U.K., as shown by Imperial Japanese primary source references from Donald Goldstein's and Katherine Dillon's *The Pacific War Papers*.¹¹ This lack of oversight frequently led to a lack of unity of effort as there was no common political direction that both the IJA and IJN had to follow.¹² Indeed, the Japanese Imperial Defense Policy was not shaped by, say, a Japanese National Security Strategy (as is the case in the United States today), but rather by parochial service goals of both the IJA and the IJN. The differences in these goals, coupled with the lack of a higher authority's direction, formed the crux of the Japanese's failures at strategic decision making.

The Japanese established the Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ) staff in 1937, comprised of both the IJA and IJN staffs, yet without an overall commander or director, as opposed to what was seen in the Allies, and in the United States today.¹³ After initial strategic documentation crafted by the Japanese in 1937 to guide the direction of their new IGHQ, the Japanese crafted no additional national strategic documents to combine and guide military policy during the remainder of the war. Rather, the IJA and IJN acted largely independently, preferring coordination only when necessary to achieve overlapping goals.¹⁴ An example of this is can be seen with Operation MI (Midway), where the IJA agreed to the plan not because of its overall strategic effect on the Pacific War but rather because it was the option discussed in the IGHQ with the least impact on army mainland priorities.¹⁵ Within the IJN itself, another divide made its presence known during decision making; Yamamoto, Commander of the Combined

Fleet, frequently advocated alternative maritime strategic and operational choices to those advocated by the IGHQ Naval Staff (and in fact, as this chapter will later discuss, different from fundamental IJN pre-war plans). The tension between these two factions inside the IJN (i.e. the General Staff versus Combined Fleet staff officers) led to much infighting and often confusion over maritime priorities, until at last one side won the argument.¹⁶ Armed with this basic knowledge of strategic and operational decision making, it is possible now to examine Japanese decisions, and Midway's effects on those decisions.

Scholars have offered several explanations as to whether Midway was either decisive or the key turning point in the Pacific War. First, many scholars have argued that following their defeat at Midway, the Japanese changed their maritime strategy; in particular, Japan shifted to the strategic defensive. In much of the conventional literature, writers portray this transition to the defensive as decisive at the operational and strategic levels from the clearly tactically decisive defeat of the Japanese in the battle itself. The perception that the defeat at Midway caused the Japanese to abandon their maritime strategy in favor of a more defensive strategy can be dissected into two components: (1) that the Japanese abandoned their original maritime strategy; and (2) that the Japanese shifted to a defensive strategy. The first argument, that the Japanese abandoned their original maritime strategy, is based on the false assumption that the Midway operation was a part of, or even consistent with, the IJN strategy of the Pacific War.

In fact, their maritime strategy was much more traditional than Mahanian. The Navy was to provide sea and air support to the Army in ground and amphibious operations. IJN career officer Captain Atsushi Oi, who served at the Naval Ministry

during the Pacific War, observes that after the Washington Naval Treaty and leading up to the Pacific War: “the naval mission of Japan was to secure command of the Western Pacific with the tacit understanding that the United States Navy would be the probable invader of the sea area.”¹⁷ The IGHQ maintained this strategic vision of engaging the U.S. Pacific Fleet within Japan’s own sphere of influence. Hence, while the IJN was directed to destroy any enemy fleets as they encountered them, this was not considered their prime objective, at least as designed by the IGHQ Naval Staff. Yamamoto, on the other hand, was fully intent on destroying the U.S. Pacific Fleet. As evidenced by the memoirs of Ugaki, the Combined Fleet’s Chief-of-Staff, Yamamoto considered this of prime importance, believing that once this end was accomplished other elements of the Japanese maritime strategy would easily fall into place.¹⁸ It was his strategic directive (which was often at odds with the IGHQ directives) that forced the issue of Midway, much as his ultimatum of resignation prior to the Pearl Harbor attack that led to the IGHQ acquiescence in that decision. Such was the forcefulness of Yamamoto, combined with his political clout and high popularity among the fleet, that he “attained an influence in the Navy’s strategic decision making that was equal of a Navy minister or Chief of Staff.”¹⁹ At Midway, under Yamamoto, the IJN fleet sought to draw the U.S. Fleet into a decisive, Mahanian engagement, which it had failed to do at the attack on Pearl Harbor.²⁰

Prior to this, the primary Navy role leading up to 1941 was to provide support for ground forces (for example, the more traditional role).²¹ What of the daring attack on Pearl Harbor? Pearl Harbor was meant to be a surprise, hit-and-run attack designed to knock out the U.S. Pacific Fleet before it could be committed to the war. As such, this plan was acceptable to the IGHQ. In particular, the IJA saw no involvement required, and

hence did not attempt to override the operation. After Pearl Harbor, the IJN General Staff desired a return to the more traditional role for the IJN. However, Yamamoto still sought the decisive fleet action to finish what he had begun at Pearl Harbor, but the IGHQ was hesitant to agree to the Combined Fleet venturing directly into American waters again, and rather desired any decisive fleet engagement to be contained within Japanese-held waters, and well within their defensive perimeter.²²

Yamamoto used his political power in conjunction with fears and shame from the aftermath of the Doolittle Raid to push his agenda, and the IGHQ gave the Midway operation (Operation MI) the go-ahead. Thus, in the disconnect between IGHQ maritime strategy and that of Yamamoto's Combined Fleet, sometimes one strategy won over another in the realm of high power politics (including the Japanese Emperor), which partly explains the reason why some key IJN forces were not present at Midway (or during Operation AL, the invasion of the Aleutian Island chain). What prompted this shift in strategy prior to Midway? One must look to the start of the Pacific War and the attack at Pearl Harbor to see the pattern begin. Yamamoto, having studied at Harvard University in the twenties and served as a Naval Attaché in Washington, DC in the twenties, was very familiar with not only American industrial capacity, but also their fighting spirit. He firmly believed that Japan could not win a protracted war against the United States and thus it was necessary to decisively defeat the U.S. Pacific Fleet in order to bring the United States to the diplomatic bargaining table.²³

The failure of the IJN at Pearl Harbor to completely destroy the fleet was a failure that constantly engaged Yamamoto's thoughts and shaped his planning.²⁴ In addition to the Mahanian impulses displayed by the admiral, Yamamoto was also the consummate

gambler, and described many of his naval plans and victories in terms of gambling at cards.²⁵ At Midway, “he was taking the greatest gamble of his life.”²⁶ Weigley’s statement concurs with Ugaki; Yamamoto sought battle at Midway and the Aleutians as “Eastern bastions for the defense of Japan’s conquered empire, and, much more importantly Yamamoto hoped, compel the remaining ships of the United States Pacific Fleet to give battle.”²⁷

The IGHQ doubted the feasibility of Operations AL and MI in strategic terms. Did it make sense to take these islands given the inherent problems Japan would face in defending them?²⁸ The Naval General Staff doubted that Japanese forces could hold these against American attacks, especially without the land-based air that the Japanese had used so effectively in their initial victories in the West and South Pacific. Indeed, the idea of using Midway as a springboard into Hawaii, while examined by many, was seen as completely unrealistic and unfeasible, particularly by the IJA who could not supply the ground forces required for such an operation.²⁹ Therefore, the true (and only legitimate) reason for conducting the Midway operation was to draw the American fleet out into a decisive engagement.

For Yamamoto, this engagement would prove to be the centerpiece of the Pacific War, and would shape all future planning by his staff, to his eventual failure. The push for this decisive engagement over other operational and strategic imperatives was one of the main failings of the Japanese during the Pacific War. That said, this push was not shared by all members of the Navy and was not the focus of the IGHQ Naval Staff, which promptly forced the Combined Fleet after Midway to return to its original strategy of maritime support of Army operations.³⁰ As Baer concedes, “Given Midway’s importance

and its strategic uniqueness, the only explanation why the Japanese went ahead with a campaign in support of an army attack on Port Moresby is bad coordination at the top levels of Japanese command.”³¹ This confusion over operational priorities led to the dispersion of forces rather than the concentration that may have allowed the Japanese to win at Midway, in spite of the Americans’ advantage in communications intelligence (of which, of course, the Japanese were unaware).

This brings us to the second facet of the argument over the effect of Midway on Japanese maritime strategy, which is that the defeat at Midway forced the Japanese into a defensive strategic posture with respect to the Navy. This is not borne out by the facts. An offensive spirit of expansion did exist, not with respect to American territory, but rather with further incursions into the South Pacific, continuing the original “seize and hold” strategy of the IGHQ.³² This can easily be seen with subsequent IJA directives in mid-June 1942 for offensive operations at Port Moresby and Papua New Guinea.³³ Indeed, the intention of the IJN, or Japan in general, was never to conquer Midway, or Hawaii, much less the continental United States. The true intention behind Midway was to draw the fleet into a decisive engagement, which Yamamoto believed would only be possible if a significant enough threat existed to American-held territory. Yamamoto was correct in this belief, as evidenced by the response elicited from Nimitz and the U.S. Pacific Fleet. Perhaps more importantly, the Japanese continued their offensive thrust into the South Pacific, which they had already planned prior to the Midway operation.³⁴ Hence, Midway should not be thought of as a natural progression of Japanese strategic and operational decision making, but rather as an attempt by Yamamoto to bypass the IGHQ plan and achieve his decisive fleet victory. His failure at Midway gave the naval

staff all the ammunition needed to reign in Yamamoto in support of their plans. Thus, Midway was a victory for the Navy general staff . . . of sorts.

As noted before, the facts of the IJN's tactical defeat at Midway are not the focus of this paper, but the aftermath of Midway included not only Japan's tactical losses, but also an even greater distrust between the IJN and the IJA than had already existed since before the Pacific War began (and was one of the great strategic failures of the Japanese during the war). This mistrust further reduced Japan's capacity for joint operational planning.³⁵ According to Vego, the IJN refused to support several operations proposed by the IJA, opting instead for a more cautious approach to operations, for example, in the Indian Ocean campaign.³⁶ This assertion is contrary to not only statements by Fuchida on IJN estimations of an Indian Ocean campaign (see chapter 2), but also to additional scholarly research based on information from former IJN officers. Toshikazu Ohmae, who was a captain in the Military Affairs Bureau of the Navy Ministry and later Chief of Operations at the IJN General Staff, wrote after the Pacific War that while the IJN conducted several raids in the Indian Ocean, there were several issues that precluded a major Indian Ocean campaign from ever forming. First, while in theory such a linkage between the Axis powers in the Middle East seems logical, the Japanese, German and Italian military, and political planners never held the same high-level strategic and operational conferences to align their strategies as the Allies did throughout the war. Additionally, the IJN faced fuel shortages that precluded continued operations in Ceylon. These were considerations even prior to Midway. Finally, in Midway's aftermath, with four less carriers to conduct such a campaign, any available sea-based aviation units were at a premium. The IJN, without clear strategic direction to lead them otherwise, could not

afford to spare their precious carriers.³⁷ In this case, one could argue that Midway decided that the Pacific War would be fought in the Pacific, and without further incursions into the Indian Ocean. This was a priority for Allied planners, who sought to prevent any joining of the Axis powers in the Middle East via the Indian Ocean, and helped to deny efforts of the Japanese at preventing any Allied resupply for the Chinese.³⁸

In spite of the hesitancy of the IJN, the naval leaders still planned to conduct offensive operations in the South Pacific. The IJN's fighting spirit was still strong, and their offensive naval power still great; certainly, they held at least parity with the American fleet at this point.³⁹ However, now Japanese forces would have to rely more on ground-based air (which they held an overwhelming superiority over the United States to this point) rather than just carrier air due to the heavily-reduced capacity of the Combined Fleet's carrier force after Midway.⁴⁰ This loss notwithstanding, and in spite of the Combined Fleet's reluctance, the Japanese continued their plans for offensive operations in the South Pacific. Midway did not halt the IJN's offensive, except against American-held territories in the Central and Eastern Pacific. In fact, the Aleutian Islands operations were actually concluded after the defeat at Midway. Thus, the failure at Midway did not lead to a complete shift in the Japanese maritime strategy from the offensive to defensive, but only marked a return to the relative safety of their defensive perimeter (something the IJA/N GHQ had argued for since Pearl Harbor). Additionally, it slowed the Japanese down just long enough for the Americans to conduct a counter-offensive, and this was not lost on Nimitz and his staff at the Pacific Fleet Headquarters.⁴¹

Yamamoto continued to seek the Mahanian decisive fleet action, and this continued to be his principle maritime strategy in spite of the loss at Midway (though he had violated Mahanian operational principles frequently in his quest for victory). Midway, while acknowledged as a tactical failure, was not seen by the IGHQ, or even by Japanese naval commanders at sea, as an earth shattering defeat, but rather as a setback, albeit an embarrassing one which the IJN sought to cover up.⁴² The emperor himself remarked to Yamamoto after the failure at Midway: “Such things must be expected in a war, so don’t lower morale and make further efforts.”⁴³ The important difference now was that the IJN would not strike out into American territory to find this battle. So in essence, the IJN’s maritime strategic goal remained unchanged, but the failure at Midway allowed the IGHQ to reign Yamamoto in from his aberrant strategic foray into U.S. waters which had not only cost four aircraft carriers, but also wasted six months of strategic oil supply.⁴⁴

So, what did Midway decide for the Japanese? From the above, we see that the defeat at Midway allowed the IJN to resume its original maritime strategy because Yamamoto’s gambling foray into American waters had failed. It also removed the feasibility for continued IJN operations in the Indian Ocean in order to disrupt Allied activity in India, and potentially establish sea lines of communications for the Japanese into the oil-rich Middle East. Most importantly, though, the aftermath of Midway negated the possibility of a short war,⁴⁵ which was precisely what the Japanese (and Yamamoto in particular) desired. Was a short war with the United States even possible given the enraged response by U.S. citizens? That is entirely debatable, and truly evaluating this is beyond the scope of this thesis. Still, it was clear to both sides after Midway that a short

war was no longer possible, just as it was clear after the German Army's failure to capture Moscow in December of 1941 that there would be no quick victory on the Eastern Front.

While all of these aspects of the post-Midway landscape are important, none of them meets any of the criteria listed in the introduction to this chapter for a decisive battle at the strategic level. No major social or political change ensued from the battle's aftermath, nor were any political objectives earned as a direct result of the battle, and certainly the Pacific War did not end. At the operational level, Midway did not change the IJN's operational campaign plans for their main drive, which was in the South Pacific. Rather, it spelled the end of Yamamoto's forays into the Central Pacific, and essentially removed any future prospects of a naval drive into the Indian Ocean. Midway did not decide or end the primary campaign of the IJN; thus, Midway was not truly decisive at the operational level either. Was Midway the turning point of the Pacific War for the Japanese? This chapter has shown that it did not mark a change to the strategic defensive for the Japanese, nor can one clearly say that it changed the course of the Pacific War, especially if one believes the arguments that the Allied victory in the Pacific was inevitable (see chapter 2). Certainly, the Japanese did not acknowledge it as such, and so the battle fails to meet Goss' criteria, as well. So, Midway was neither decisive nor a turning point for the Japanese.

Evaluating the Impact of Midway on Allied Strategy

Turning now to the effects of Midway's victory on Allied strategy, and in particular the Americans since they held the principle role in the Pacific theater, it is important to illustrate some key differences between Allied decision making and that of

Japan. The United States and United Kingdom were principle Allies during World War II, and in 1942 formed the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff. Unlike the Japanese IGHQ, the civilian authorities of both countries, notably President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, were firmly in control of their national strategic decision making, and together guided Allied military strategy via the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff . Beginning with the ARCADIA conferences in January 1942, the Allied political leadership and Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff held several conferences throughout the course of the war to establish broad military goals and priorities for action. It is important to note that even prior to the United States entering World War II, both Allied powers agreed that Nazi Germany held the greatest threat to their continued existence, and was the only Axis power that could reasonably achieve a victory.⁴⁶ The Allies were confident that, with time, they would defeat the Japanese in the Pacific, and so the Allied political leadership made the decision to engage in a strategic defensive in the Pacific with the limited resources available, and focus on massing forces for an invasion into Europe.⁴⁷ This would maintain the primary focus on Nazi Germany, and give needed support to the third principle ally, the Soviet Union.

Hence, the Allies clearly began the Pacific War, both by strategic design and material necessity (due to a shortage of ships and forces in theater), on the defensive. The main question, then, is: when did the Allies shift to the strategic offensive? The argument from Baer and other scholars was that with the victory at Midway the Allies then shifted to the strategic offensive. “The United States would never have to fight another defensive campaign,” and “the balance of sea power in the Pacific shifted in favor of the United States.”⁴⁸ Was this true? Was Midway the turning point of the Pacific for the Americans?

Was it decisive, at either the strategic or operational levels of war? There is no debate about it being a tactical victory. In order to answer this question, it is important to first examine the U.S. fleet actions prior to Midway. Was the United States strictly on the defensive? A strategic defensive, as scholars from Willmott to Vego have discussed, but at the operational level the seeds of the offensive had already begun to grow right after the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁴⁹ The U.S. Navy, under the driving force of King, immediately sought retribution in the form of hit-and-run attacks against Japan in the South Pacific, culminating in the Battle of the Coral Sea, which arguably was a draw, which even Baer notes still proved the Navy's willingness to fight.⁵⁰ King's reports to the Secretary of the Navy during the war attest to this.⁵¹

The American Navy's conduct prior to Midway is not so much in question as the American strategy afterwards. The conventional wisdom states that with the victory at Midway, the United States seized the strategic initiative and commenced offensive operations against the Japanese. Yet, this shift was not as clear to those in the American armed forces at the time. From the outset of the war, senior military commanders in the United States held a debate over concentration and focus of effort between the Pacific and European theaters. The Army, led by General George C. Marshall, believed the victory at Midway alleviated the need for the United States to continue to focus attention on Japan and wanted a greater emphasis to be placed on Europe,⁵² and indeed this was the intended pre-war strategy. On the other hand, the Navy sought to immediately strike the Japanese, and their view was shared by the vast majority of the general public, which itself provided political pressure after the attacks on Pearl Harbor.⁵³

Even after the victory at Midway, the Allied leadership still debated over what should be done in the aftermath. It was not clear that American forces should seize the initiative and commence offensive (even limited) operations in the Pacific. There were many discussions held by both naval and army planners over which strategy to pursue in the aftermath of Midway, most of which revolved around planning that had begun in the early months of 1942, and that did not significantly change even after the victory at Midway.⁵⁴ King, whose opinion prevailed, believed this to be the opportunity to strike back at the IJN by conducting limited offensive operations in the Pacific theater, still something contested by Army commanders at the War Department.⁵⁵ The only prominent Army leader who argued for an immediate offensive in the Pacific was, of course, MacArthur, who consistently requested additional resources in order to support offensives in the Pacific at the earliest time feasible.⁵⁶ In essence, the United States did not claim the strategic offensive immediately after Midway, and still could not decide on what strategy to use in the theater. Rather King used this uncertainty and wringing of hands, coupled with the forces in the Navy and Marine Corps that were under his direct control, to seize the initiative within the ranks of the military commanders and Joint Chiefs.⁵⁷

King felt that Japan had reached “the culminating point of victory” and that the United States must then seize the opportunity.⁵⁸ Further, he believed Japan had “lost control of the momentum of the war.”⁵⁹ This belief was not held by many in the other services, but such was the strength of King’s personality, his relationship with Roosevelt and his power within the Joint Chiefs (as well as the Army and Air Force’s preoccupation with the European theater) that by combining his influence with the inherent political

pressure from the American public to strike back at Japan, he was able to continue and enlarge offensive operations in the Pacific. The victory at Midway allowed the Allies breathing room to refocus their next efforts in the Pacific, but the Americans did not immediately spring into action; rather, they examined their options for offensive operations. After sending an initial set of mission priorities to Nimitz on the occasion of his change of command in December 1941, King, in January 1942, and in records contained in the National Archives at College Park, MD, established his Pacific priorities. These priorities included protecting the Hawaii-Midway line (which would serve as a defense for the coastal United States), and protecting the lines of communications between the United States and Australia (for example, the South Pacific).⁶⁰

Hence, initial naval plans sought to engage the Japanese, at the earliest opportunity, in the South Pacific.⁶¹ That they initially engaged the Japanese at Guadalcanal was not a function of original planning, but rather of intelligence received that the Japanese were constructing an airfield there to enable their continued offensive operations in the South Pacific. The American goal initially was to counter the seizure of Tulagi by the Japanese, who desired to use that location as an advanced seaplane base. Clearly, this was not a strategic move planned well in advance, but rather King seizing the opportunity that presented itself and suited his purposes, especially in light of MacArthur's proposal to seize Rabaul, which King did not support and which would necessitate the use of the U.S. Navy's few remaining carriers.⁶² The Japanese retrenched in their original strategic and operational plans, and the Americans executed their own original plan, with the addition of the Guadalcanal invasion, which King saw as the opportunity for a limited counter-offensive. This gave the Navy the chance to throw the

IJN off balance and prevent it (or at least forestall it) from continuing their drives against Australia via New Guinea and Port Moresby, and then toward New Caledonia and French Polynesia. These limited offensives also provided the American forces a starting-point towards commencing their first major campaign in the Pacific; the Solomon Islands Campaign, an operation King directed Nimitz to plan for as early as February 1942.⁶³ Vego states the case well: “The United States Navy achieved an operational success in the Battle of Midway. However, that in itself would not have been sufficient to reverse the tide in the Pacific had it not been followed by an offensive operation to exploit the operational success at Midway.”⁶⁴

This operational success was arguably necessary for future operations in the South and Central Pacific, but it certainly was not sufficient to win the war, or turn the tide of the war. So, what did Midway decide for the American fleet? Most obviously, for the U.S. Pacific Fleet, victory at Midway ensured the fleet’s survival. Beyond this, it did not decide that the Americans would conduct offensive operations, as those had already begun to be planned in early 1942 by King and MacArthur (which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter) and the Navy simply awaited the opportunity and material readiness to conduct these operations. From the Japanese perspective, Midway did check their Central Pacific operation, but for the Americans there was no guarantee that the Japanese would not attack there again. The Americans, seeking an opportunity to strike, saw this opportunity at Tulagi (with Guadalcanal added) and seized it. This is hardly decisive by the definitions outlined above. Was Midway the turning point for the Americans? As shown, it did not fundamentally alter their strategic or operational decision making, since these were in play prior to Midway.

The IJN still held the preponderance of forces in the Pacific, and could still have seized the initiative, but the fact that they did not was not a function of their loss at Midway, but rather uncertainty over what to do in the second phase of their operations (see chapter 2). They merely continued with their original plan of seize-and-hold in the South Pacific, focusing on their continued push south towards Australia, and were in no way deterred by the American victory at Midway. The Japanese continued offensive operations in New Guinea in the summer of 1942, and in fact conducted an offensive attack at Milne Bay on 25 July 1942, over a month after their defeat at Midway. The Americans, for their part, simply seized the opportunity ahead of what the Japanese expected (the IGHQ did not anticipate an American counter-offensive until 1943 at the earliest).⁶⁵ Taking account of all of this evidence, what can be said for Baer's summary statement with respect to Midway? "For American strategists, Midway unexpectedly solved their South Pacific problem. Japan no longer had the strength to force its way southward. The United States would never have to fight another defensive campaign. With the Battle of Midway, the balance of sea power in the Pacific shifted in favor of the United States."⁶⁶

Baer's bold claim would seem to make Midway the turning point of the war, yet the premise is untrue: the Japanese still continued their drive into the South and Southwest Pacific as planned, and the Americans commenced a counter-offensive in either the South Pacific or Southwest Pacific, as planned (in this case the South Pacific). Not having to face four additional IJN aircraft carriers in the southern Solomon Islands was surely an important factor for planning, and most likely gave the Americans additional confidence (albeit a cautious one) in their efforts, but Midway in no way

changed American strategy. Further, it did not significantly alter Allied operational decisions to conduct operations in the South Pacific, except that it gave King more ammunition with which to push for offensive action in spite of Marshall's objections.⁶⁷ From this, it can be concluded that Midway was neither a decisive battle nor a turning point for the Americans.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that, while a success and important at the operational and strategic levels, Midway was neither decisive nor the turning point of the war. Perhaps another battle or campaign is more deserving of this title, or perhaps, as Willmott noted, each is merely an important milestone on the way to an eventual Allied victory over Japan. The next chapter will examine another campaign in the Pacific War which may be able to meet the definitions of either decisive or turning point in a way that Midway cannot.

¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011).

² Davis, xi.

³ Hadley P. Willmott, *The Battle of Leyte Gulf: The Last Fleet Action* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 13, 35-36.

⁴ Gray, 12-13.

⁵ Hans Delbrück, *History of the Art of War, Vol IV: The Dawn of Modern Warfare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 435.

⁶ Gray, 11.

⁷ Thomas Goss, "Gettysburg's Decisive Battle," *Military Review* (July-August 2004): 11.

⁸ Parshall and Tully, 428-430.

⁹ Roger D. Launius, “What are Turning Points in History, and What Were They for the Space Age,” in *Societal Impact of Spaceflight*, eds. Steven J. Dick and Roger D. Launius (New York: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2013), 20.

¹⁰ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 230-233.

¹¹ James L. McClain, *Japan: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002), 455-456; Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 184-185; Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *The Pacific War Papers: Japanese Documents of World War II* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2004), 113.

¹² Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 185; David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 449.

¹³ Evans and Peattie, 458.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 448-449.

¹⁵ Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 227; Kisaka Junichiro, *Taiheiyo Senso* (Tokyo: Shogakkan, 1989), 123.

¹⁶ Evans and Peattie, 458-459.

¹⁷ Atsushi Oi, “The Japanese Navy in 1941,” in *The Pacific War Papers: Japanese Documents of World War II*, eds., Donald M. Goldstein, and Katherine V. Dillon (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2004), 11.

¹⁸ Parshall, 24; Matome Ugaki, *Fading Victory: The Diary of Admiral Matome Ugaki, 1941-1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 12-13; Evans and Peattie, 472-473; Masataka Chihaya, “Some Features Concerning Changes in the Japanese Fleet Organization during the War,” in *The Pacific War Papers: Japanese Documents of World War II*, eds., Donald M. Goldstein, and Katherine V. Dillon (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2004), 287.

¹⁹ Evans and Peattie, 461.

²⁰ Fuchida and Okumina, 53; Healy, 20.

²¹ Isom, 78.

²² Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin*, 15-16; Fuchida and Okumina, 60; Alan Zimm, *The Attack on Pearl Harbor: Strategy, Combat, Myths, Deceptions* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishing, 2011), 15-18.

- ²³ Hoyt, 41, 55, 107; Adams, 42.
- ²⁴ Ugaki, 75; Richard B. Frank, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 23-24; Parshall and Tully, 33.
- ²⁵ Hoyt, 41, 157.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 157.
- ²⁷ Weigley, 271.
- ²⁸ Evans and Peattie, 488-490.
- ²⁹ Isom, 279-281; Fuchida and Okumina, 50-51.
- ³⁰ Evans and Peattie, 489-490.
- ³¹ Baer, 218.
- ³² Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 195.
- ³³ U.S. and IJN operational reports, IGHQ Navy Order 20, 11 July 1942, in Frank, 45.
- ³⁴ Frank, 22; Fuchida and Okumina, 55-56.
- ³⁵ Vego, II-15.
- ³⁶ Ibid., II-14-15.
- ³⁷ Toshikazu Ohmae, "Japanese Operations in the Indian Ocean," from *The Japanese Navy in World War II: In the Words of Former Japanese Naval Officers*, ed. David C. Evans (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 106-108, 115-117.
- ³⁸ Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The War Years*, vol. 1 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 150-151; Mark A. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, The Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 72.
- ³⁹ Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 523.
- ⁴⁰ William B. Johnson, *The Pacific Campaign in World War II: From Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal* (New York: Routledge Books, 2008), 144.
- ⁴¹ Elmer B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 175.

⁴² Ugaki, 160; Parshall and Tully, 422; Tameichi Hara, *Japanese Destroyer Captain: Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal and Midway—The Great Naval Battles as Seen Through Japanese Eyes* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1967), 93-94.

⁴³ Hoyt, 167.

⁴⁴ Isom, 242.

⁴⁵ Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin*, 523.

⁴⁶ Proceedings of ARCADIA Conference in Washington, DC, 24 December 1941-14 January 1942, part 2, para 3, Combined Chiefs of Staff, box 1/3, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS (hereafter referred to as ARCADIA); Stoler, 67-69; David Rigby, *Allied Master Strategists: The Combined Chiefs of Staff in World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012), 69.

⁴⁷ ARCADIA, para 3, 18; Ernest King to Joint U.S. Chiefs of Staff, JCS 48: Defense of Island Bases in the Pacific, memorandum, 5 May 1942, RG 38, box 37, Office Files of the Chief of Naval Operations, Double Zero Files, National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter referred to as CNO Office Files); Grace P. Hayes, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in World War II: The War Against Japan* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1982), 154.

⁴⁸ Baer, 221.

⁴⁹ Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin*, 130-131.

⁵⁰ James M. Steele, *Command Summary of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, USN, 7 December 1941-31 August 1945* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2012), 122; Baer, 217-218.

⁵¹ King, 45-46.

⁵² Stoler, 60-61; see also Robert W. Love, Jr., "Fighting a Global War, 1941-1945," in *In Peace and War: Interpretations of American Naval History*, eds. Kenneth J. Hagan and Michael T. McMaster (London: Praeger Security International, 2008), 211.

⁵³ King, 38; Love, 211.

⁵⁴ Strategic Plans War Plans Division, Courses of Action Open to US in a Pacific Campaign, Future Plans Section 1942-1944, series 11, RG 38, box 153, National Archives College Park, MD.

⁵⁵ Stoler, 60.

⁵⁶ Willmott, *The War with Japan*, 24.

⁵⁷ Love, 213.

⁵⁸ Weigley, 274; King, 49.

⁵⁹ Weigley, 273; King, 49-50.

⁶⁰ Steele, 122, 185; Commander in Chief US Fleet (COMINCH FLEET) to Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC), radio dispatch 021718, 2 January 1942, CNO Office Files; Ernest King, COMINCH US FLEET to President of the United States, memorandum, 5 March 1942, CNO Office Files.

⁶¹ Steele, 122; COMINCH US FLEET to CINCPAC, radio dispatch 202150, 20 January 1942, CNO Office Files; King, 38-39; Ernest King, COMINCH US FLEET to US Joint Chiefs of Staff, memorandum, 4 May 1942, CNO Office Files.

⁶² Willmott, *The War with Japan*, 90, 94.

⁶³ COMINCH US FLEET to CINCPAC, radio dispatch 122200, 12 February 1942, CNO Office Files.

⁶⁴ Vego, X-84.

⁶⁵ Frank, 599.

⁶⁶ Baer, 221.

⁶⁷ Ernest King, COMINCH US FLEET to Chief of Staff US Army, Ser. 00555, 26 June 1942, CNO Office Files.

CHAPTER 4

ALTERNATIVE CAMPAIGNS FOR THE TURNING POINT OF THE WAR

Chapter 2 of this thesis gave a detailed historiographical account of the literature about Midway, from the end of World War II until the present. Clear disagreements over the importance and implications of Midway are obvious from this literature review. Chapter Three analyzed the implication of Midway for the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war in the Pacific. As shown in the chapter, Midway cannot logically be called a decisive battle at the operational or strategic levels; nor was it the turning point of the Pacific War. The question remains: was there another battle that can claim the title of decisive, or of the turning point of the Pacific War? Guadalcanal (Operation Watchtower Task One) and the subsequent Operation Cartwheel (Solomon Islands and New Guinea) campaigns are prominent candidates for this title. This chapter will examine this question, first by evaluating the literature itself on the subject, and then by analyzing these campaigns in the same way that the previous chapter evaluated Midway's impact on the Pacific War.

Literature Evaluating Alternate Strategic Turning Points in Pacific War

In spite of the preponderance of literature from Morison onward that describes Midway as decisive, in the wake of Willmott's work in the eighties and after, some authors have sought to examine other battles as being more important to the overall progress of the Pacific War. Indeed, Morison himself discusses the importance of Guadalcanal in his volume, completed after the volume on Midway, *The Struggle for Guadalcanal, August 1942-February 1943* (1948). While he discusses the battle's

importance to follow-on decisions, he does not attribute to Guadalcanal Midway's importance.¹ He does reference King's reports, which stated that Guadalcanal was "decisive."² John Keegan began this trend in *The Second World War* (1990) by analyzing Midway in the broader context of World War II.³ Keegan describes the strategic situation after Midway by noting that before the victory at Guadalcanal, the American fleet was still only conducting limited counter-offensive operations to seize whatever initiative they could. The Japanese were still planning to continue their seize-and-hold strategy in the South Pacific. In all respects, the Pacific War was still undecided, with Japan still hoping (in vain) for a negotiated peace and American planners still troubled over, and largely focusing on, Germany. Keegan argues that the Solomon Islands Campaign, which lasted from 1942 well into 1943, and in particular the Guadalcanal Campaign (fought from 7 August 1942 through 9 February 1943) may instead be seen as the turning point for the Japanese. This was the first major offensive launched by the United States, and the success the United States had in this campaign, particularly the attrition experienced by the Japanese, forced the IJN finally into the strategic defensive, and Japan remained in that position until its defeat in 1945.⁴

Williamson Murray and Allen Millett furthered this idea in their survey of World War II entitled *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (2000), which also took a step back and looked at Midway in the War's broader context.⁵ They argued that after Midway, the Japanese still held the edge in naval forces in the Pacific over the Allies, who at best had a rough parity.⁶ With regard to Japanese strategy, they noted that the loss at Midway, viewed as a setback by the Japanese, did not fundamentally alter their

seize-and-hold strategy, but after Guadalcanal, they were forced into the strategic defensive due to the heavy attrition of forces.⁷

Parshall and Tully note in *Shattered Sword* that in spite of Japan's loss at Midway, the strategic formulations and indeed the fighting spirit of the Japanese armed forces were largely unaffected, hardly what one would expect after a decisive engagement.⁸ In fact, several times throughout the campaign, both sides attempted to regain positions at Guadalcanal, which drastically reduced by attrition the fighting force available to both the IJA and IJN (and indeed the Allies, as well) until finally they were forced to give up the campaign and retreat in February 1943.⁹ These losses were much more damaging to the Japanese who lacked the industrial capacity, manpower, and training programs to replace these losses as quickly and effectively as the Americans could.¹⁰

A string of other writers in the past decade further developed the idea that the Guadalcanal Campaign, and the continuing Solomon Islands Campaign, was much more deserving of the title of decisive than Midway. Weigley added the judgment that in addition to material losses in Japan's forces, the loss at Guadalcanal finally halted the Japanese advances (and plans for advance) in the South Pacific, and they were finally forced into the strategic defensive on every front.¹¹ According to Willmott, Charles Messenger, and Robin Cross in *World War II*, following the victory at Guadalcanal, the Japanese could no longer mount any significant offensive, while the Americans were finally springing into action.¹² Weigley continued, "The Solomon Islands and New Guinea campaigns were gradually wrestling the initiative away from the Japanese forever."¹³ While MacArthur's drive from the Southwest Pacific was slow and laborious

(a characterization by Weigley that does not hold merit in light of the rapidity of MacArthur's advances in the Southwest Pacific), it became clear to King that "the Central Pacific fleet would precipitate a decisive engagement with the Japanese fleet."¹⁴ Finally, Weigley comments that the American offensive began after the victories in the Southern Pacific, particularly at Guadalcanal from which the Japanese would never recover.¹⁵ Willmott noted that while Midway has often been considered the turning point of the Pacific War, the defeat at Guadalcanal shook not only the IJN but the IJA as well, being the Army's first major defeat in the Pacific. Ultimately, according to Willmott, Messenger, and Cross, Guadalcanal was "a more serious blow to Japan's strategic plans and an unanticipated defeat at the hands of the Americans."¹⁶

Perhaps the most important work on the Guadalcanal Campaign since Morison's is Richard Frank's *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Battle* (1990).¹⁷ Frank takes all of the previous research on U.S. naval operations at sea, amphibious operations, and air operations and fuses them into what he describes as "the first balanced study of the campaign."¹⁸ His book is a detailed narrative account, which not only focuses on the campaign itself, but also the decision-making prior to and after it. On the subject of this thesis, Frank challenges arguments that the United States would inevitably win the Pacific War, and also that Japan had lost the initiative after Midway.¹⁹ Perhaps most importantly, he comments on the fallacy of viewing the strategic and operational decisions of the Allies as being "simply the inevitable products of inexorable political and military logic."²⁰ The details of how both the Allies and Japanese made their decisions in the Pacific War is the subject of the next chapter.

The past decade has produced several convincing arguments for the importance of the Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, and New Guinea Campaigns, in counterpoint to the earlier arguments of Willmott. Craig Symonds in *The Battle of Midway* (2011) and John Adams in *If Mahan Ran the Great Pacific War* (2008) are two prime examples of the retrenchment from the idea that Midway was the most decisive naval battle since Trafalgar.²¹ They present new perspectives on the battle itself, yet offer no new arguments to support their continued claims for the decisiveness of the victory. Neither do they counter the arguments started by Willmott. John Lundstrom's *Black Shoe Carrier Admiral* (2006), which describes the career of Admiral Frank Fletcher, seeks to counter the myths and suppositions about his successes and failures as the naval task force commander at Coral Sea, Midway, and Guadalcanal.²² While the implications of each battle is not his focus, due to Fletcher's high rank during the early portions of the Pacific War, Lundstrom's work described operational decision-making for each battle, and presented a balanced look at the implications of each, falling close in line with Willmott's arguments. However, to this day, the mythic status of Midway suggests that less balanced perceptions persist. Hence, the problem still remains; can scholars reach a consensus on the decisiveness of Midway, or Guadalcanal, or any other battle in the Pacific War?

An Alternate Strategic Turning Point in the Pacific War

As seen in chapter 3, from the perspective of both the Americans and Japanese, there was nothing decisive about the outcome of Midway. It did not provide the ultimate, momentum-shifting victory for the United States, after which the Americans immediately began offensive operations against Japan, who no longer sought the offensive. The reality, as is usually the case with history, was more complex. Still it begs the question:

was there a different battle or campaign that provided the shift for the Americans to offensive operations and clearly relegated the Japanese to the defensive? This section will analyze this question by using the same approach and framework with which chapter 3 evaluated Midway

Before the victory at Guadalcanal and the subsequent successes in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, the debate still raged between the U.S. Army and Navy over the exact way to proceed in the Pacific, and how many forces to shift towards that theater to take advantage of the victory at Midway. The American fleet was still only conducting limited offensive operations. MacArthur proposed an operation to retake and defend Rabaul from his South Pacific area in June 1942, while King countered with a proposal for a less risky operation beginning in the southern Solomon Islands, beginning in Tulagi, which was a part of his initial formulation for strategy in the South Pacific upon assuming command of the U.S. Fleet in January 1942.²³ The Japanese were still planning continued operations into the South Pacific, and maintained presence in the Aleutian Island, which forced the Americans to defend their soil in several locations. Parshall and Tully note that in spite of Japan's loss at Midway, the strategic formulations and indeed the fighting spirit of the Japanese armed forces were largely unaffected, hardly what one would expect after a decisive engagement.²⁴ In all respects, the Pacific War was still undecided, with Japan still hoping (in vain) for a negotiated peace and American planners still troubled over, and largely focusing on, Germany.

The Guadalcanal Campaign (Watchtower Task One, fought from 7 August 1942 through 9 February 1943) was an important counter-offensive to check the Japanese advance south, and it was a struggle that caused such a level of attrition and reversal that

the IJA was forced to commit additional forces to the operation, diverting soldiers and aircraft from their priority missions in mainland China and other South Pacific operations.²⁵ This shift in operational planning and execution was something not seen after Midway, and certainly not by the IJA, who continued their strategic course after Midway unabated. The greatest effect of Midway on operations at Guadalcanal was the reduction in IJN carrier air support, which necessitated increased ground air support. As Hoyt discussed in his work and substantiated by primary sources, these actions reduced by attrition the fighting force available to both the IJA and IJN until finally they were forced to give up the campaign and retreat in early 1943.²⁶ The primary sources of Ugaki also substantiate Parshall's and Tully's claim that these losses were much more serious for the Japanese, who lacked the industrial capacity, manpower, and training programs to replace them as quickly and effectively as the Americans could.²⁷ Admiral John S. McCain, a veteran senior officer of several South Pacific campaigns, stated to Nimitz in August 1942, "Guadalcanal can be a **sinkhole** for enemy air power and can be consolidated, expanded, and exploited to the enemy's mortal hurt."²⁸

Capitalizing on the initial success of the Operation Watchtower Task One, and as planned in the early phases of the Pacific War, King and Nimitz executed Tasks Two and Three, which became the Solomon Islands and New Guinea Operation Cartwheel.²⁹ These operations ultimately sounded the death knell for the Japanese and may be seen as the turning point for the Japanese.³⁰ Guadalcanal alone, from 1 August through 15 December 1942, caused the Japanese losses of over 20,800 soldiers, seven heavy ships, eleven destroyers, six submarines and 507 military planes total.³¹ While the American losses were substantial as well, during this period the United States commissioned seven

heavy ships (including two aircraft carriers), sixty-two destroyers and eighteen submarines, compared to Japan's one light cruiser, seven destroyers and fourteen submarines.³² This does not include the vast multitude of new ships that would be commissioned in 1943 after the campaign's end. Quite simply, the Japanese could not keep up, and the attrition from Guadalcanal was what most prominently led to the shift of Japan's strategy to the defensive.

Although the defeat at Midway, with the loss of four aircraft carriers, frequently is cited as decisive with respect to material losses, the Guadalcanal Campaign, and the subsequent Solomon Islands and New Guinea Campaign, was much more deserving of the title decisive than Midway in that regard. In addition to material losses in Japan's forces, the loss at Guadalcanal finally halted the Japanese advances (and plans for advance) in the South Pacific, and they were finally forced into the strategic defensive on every front.³³ In February 1943, Nimitz took Guadalcanal, and MacArthur captured Eastern New Guinea. With these victories, Greenfield notes, "the Americans went over to the offensive and began to gain the initiative in the Pacific."³⁴ Each of these victories sprung from the air power established at Guadalcanal's Henderson Field, which proved crucial to the Allies' success in the South Pacific. Willmott notes that this utilization of land-based airpower to establish a defensive position in the South Pacific in order to wear down enemy naval units was precisely the IJN General Staff's strategy to defeat the U.S. Navy in the Pacific. With Guadalcanal, the Allies turned this strategy against the Japanese.³⁵

In November 1943, Nimitz, as directed by King in September that year, but now finally with sufficient sea combat power, "unleashed the Central Pacific drive."³⁶

Willmott noted that while Midway has often been considered the turning point of the Pacific War, the defeat at Guadalcanal shook not only the IJN but the IJA, being the Army's first major defeat in the Pacific. Ultimately, Guadalcanal was "a more serious blow to Japan's strategic plans and an unanticipated defeat at the hands of the Americans."³⁷

The importance of Guadalcanal, New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands is easy to see, and many scholars characterize these campaigns as perhaps the true strategic turning point of the Pacific War. Nonetheless, many scholars, popular writers, and naval officers cling to the notion of Midway as a decisive victory for the United States, and the turning point of the Pacific War. This chapter has shown that, at the operational and strategic levels, Guadalcanal is a stronger candidate than Midway for being the turning point of the war.

¹ Samuel E. Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II*, vol. 5, *The Struggle for Guadalcanal, August 1942-February 1943* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1948).

² King, 61.

³ Keegan.

⁴ Ibid., 291.

⁵ Murray and Millett.

⁶ Ibid., 204.

⁷ Ibid., 217.

⁸ Parshall, 422.

⁹ Hoyt, 222.

¹⁰ Parshall, 423.

- ¹¹ Weigley, 278; Murray and Millett, 217; Parshall, 429.
- ¹² Hadley P. Willmott, Charles Messenger, and Robin Cross, *World War II* (London: Darling Kindersley, 2004), 208.
- ¹³ Weigley, 280.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 285.
- ¹⁵ Murray and Millett, 340.
- ¹⁶ Willmott, Messenger, and Cross, 208.
- ¹⁷ Frank.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., viii.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 599-601.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 3.
- ²¹ Adams; Symonds, 358.
- ²² John B. Lundstrom, *Black Shoe Carrier Admiral* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006).
- ²³ Frank, 6-8, 32-33.
- ²⁴ Parshall and Tully, 422.
- ²⁵ Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 228-229.
- ²⁶ IGHQ Order 159, 18 November 1942, in Louis Morton, *United States Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific, Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, US Army Green Book, 1962), 365; Sugiyama and Nagano Osamu, "Yohei jiko ni kanshi sojo (report to the Throne on Operational Troop Matters)" 31 December 1942, in Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, 230.
- ²⁷ Ugaki, 329; Frank, 609-611.
- ²⁸ Commander Air Forces Southern Pacific to Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet, naval message 310402, August 1942, in Lundstrom 474.
- ²⁹ Hayes, 419-421.
- ³⁰ Charles W. Koburger, Jr., *Pacific Turning Point: The Solomons Campaign, 1942-1943* (London: Praeger, 1995), xii.

³¹ Frank, 601, 609, 613.

³² Ibid., 615.

³³ Weigley, 278; Murray and Millett, 217; Parshall, 429.

³⁴ Greenfield, 7.

³⁵ Willmott, *The War with Japan*, xiv-xv.

³⁶ Greenfield, 11.

³⁷ Willmott, Messenger, and Cross, 208.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Noted writer and scholar on joint military operations and strategy, Vego once wrote, “in retrospect, the Battle of Midway was clearly the turning point of the entire war in the Pacific.”¹ This thesis has analyzed both the vast historiography of Midway and Pacific War literature, as well as several key primary source documents. This research leads to the conclusion that the common conception with regard to Midway’s decisiveness is based on faulty assumptions and is ultimately wrong. Midway was a very important battle, but it did not decide what many have thought, nor does it meet the criteria for a decisive battle or a turning point as set out at the beginning of the thesis.

If not in the case of Midway, could any battle have been decisive if the Japanese defeat in the Pacific War was inevitable?² Willmott describes the situation well:

Decisive implies that the US victory was one which the Japanese could never recover from, and that if reversed, a situation which could never have been turned around by the Americans without such a battle and victory. If the defeat of Japan was assured because of the disparity of national resources, Midway was at best only a milestone on the road that led to defeat; it was not a signpost that marked a parting of the way, one track leading to American victory and the other in precisely the opposite direction.³

Parshall and Tully, building on Willmott’s conclusion, state:

The Battle of Coral Sea provided the first hints that the Japanese high-water mark had been reached, but it was the Battle of Midway that put up the sign for all to see. Midway also marked the gateway to attritional war that would be fought in the Solomons, a campaign that would irreparably ruin the Japanese Navy by destroying its elite naval aviation cadres and wrecking its surface forces beyond redemption. Midway didn’t produce these consequences by itself, but it created the circumstances whereby the Japanese Navy would be fed into the shredder.⁴

Midway did not clearly mark the shift of the strategic offensive as many believe, and the sequence of events before and after the battle were not as simple as the proverbial chess match many describe in World War II accounts. Writers, attempting to provide a framework to understand historic and modern events, often portray the history of war in a smooth, logical progression, as if things were meant to happen a certain way, but this vastly over-simplifies history. American commanders and planners saw opportunities and seized them. They still had no unified American command over the entire Pacific area, and there was often little consensus that early in the war on what strategy to follow. Terms such as “strategic initiative”⁵ give the feeling of a chess match, carefully planned out with a few real, moving pieces. Yet war is much more akin to games where decision-makers couple skill with chance and risk, and whoever manages each of these essential facets best will prove victorious.

The effects of Midway are only really obvious in hindsight, and were not as immediate as Baer or Vego would make them seem. Many still cling to the notion of the decisive battle, and see Midway as a paragon of this concept, even while newer literature (particularly from Willmott, Frank, Parshall, and Tully) make it clear that the United States still faced a powerful foe in Japan, who, in their mind, could easily attack again. This thesis has shown that the strategic decision making by both sides was not decisively fixed by the outcome of Midway, nor did the battle mark a true shift from the strategic defensive to the offensive as many claim. The IJN continued offensive operations in concert with the IJA, with the Navy in a supporting role. Yamamoto still sought the decisive fleet engagement (just not in American waters). Yet the battle had its effects—most importantly, and most distressingly for the Japanese, the war would not end with a

negotiated victory, which was arguably not possible anyway. Instead, it became a war of attrition that ended in Japan's complete defeat.

This in no way lessens the importance of the battle, in particular for American culture, history, and patriotism. Still, as noted by the famous Professor Michael Howard in his seminal work "The Use and Abuse of Military History," (1961) scholars and military professionals alike must study the true "width, breadth and context" of military history.⁶ Howard's advice in this area is profoundly important in the case of Midway, where popular history and patriotism have often supplanted more scholarly research. Indeed, additional research should be conducted to examine not just Midway and Guadalcanal, but rather each battle in the Pacific in the search for either a decisive victory or a turning point of the war. If no appropriate battle or point can be found, then Willmott may be correct in his assertion that the Pacific War was not about decisive battles, but rather milestones and campaigns.

Worthwhile research could also examine the point at which Midway became known as a decisive victory, and by whom; scholars, popular writers, news media, and military professionals. Was this idea of Midway as decisive simply a post-war construct or did it have definite purposes during the war? Unlike the German officer experience within the Eastern Front campaigns and in particular the Battle for Moscow in 1941, in the aftermath of Midway the IJN held no substantive reliefs or firings, which would have indicated a realization of the disaster at Midway. Does this counter the view of decisiveness, or something different about the IJN system of personnel management, especially with respect to defeats in battle? What of the general processes of Japanese decision-making during the war itself, outside of what this thesis has already examined?

Finally, for Midway and any other so-called decisive battle, perhaps there exists a general problem with causation in the sequence of wars and their ultimate victory, which would also require additional research and discussion. This would clarify not only our historical knowledge of the Pacific War, but may also influence future planners in their efforts to seek a decisive victory, when such a victory may not fit into the context of the war at hand.

¹ Vego, II-13.

² Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin*, 519.

³ Ibid., 519-520.

⁴ Parshall, 430.

⁵ Baer, 220-221.

⁶ Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," *Parameters* 11, no. 1 (1982): 14.

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